

THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT



**THE LAST DOCTOR
PART TWO**

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PART TWO
ALL IS TRUE

*Tell me, Muse, of the man of many ways ...
Many were they whose cities he saw, whose minds he learned of,
many the pains he suffered in his spirit on the wide sea,
struggling for his own life and the homecoming of his companions.*
—The Odyssey, Homer

*I'm the urban spaceman, baby, here comes the twist:
I don't exist.*
—'I'm the Urban Spaceman', the Bonzo Dog Dooh-Dah Band

*One grows tired of jelly babies, Castellan ... One grows tired of almost everything,
Castellan, except power.*
—The Invasion of Time, Anthony Read & Graham Williams

Chapter One

Dream A Little Dream of Me

Gallifrey, long before the Rassilon Era

The child stood on the high, barren hills that overlooked Gallifrey's southern mountains. His overly long hair rustled in the wind and he struggled to keep it in place. He hated goodbyes, and in this moment he knew he always would. The child would almost totally change, many times over, in the coming lifetimes, but that one characteristic would always remain the same.

He looked up at the woman. She looked much older than him, with lustrous ebony skin and a tangled mane of unruly dark curls, but their vast gulf in ages hardly mattered. She never made him feel inferior for lacking her universe-spanning perspective. They were great friends. She had become closer to him even than his family.

"Do I have to go now?"

She looked down at him and nodded, saying nothing. She knew how the child felt, and her silence almost seemed to punish him more.

"I don't want to go," the boy insisted.

"Now, now," she warned. "You're a big boy, you sound very immature saying that." She smirked. "Don't you want to become a Time Lord?"

"Well ... I'm not sure I do actually," the boy huffed. "This isn't what I want, it's what *they* want. If I get stuck in with all this, when will I become a doctor?"

A coach ground to a halt on the hills. The sunbaked scene already looked like a memory—the burnt orange sky blending with the scrubby grass blowing in the crisp air to create a sepia tone, washed out and ancient. The ornate calèche—a robotic Badger at its reins—and the forbidding spires of the boy's family home in the distance also looked like a picture from one of those alien books from long ago that the Hermit had given him.

The guards stepped out, dead-eyed with the mindless ceremony of their task. For a moment their crimson uniforms and white capes blazed against the monochromatic hillside,

before the surroundings seemed to suck the colours away. An apprentice *valeyard*¹ was beckoning the boy impatiently to the coach, the long sleeves of his silver-trimmed black robes picking up bronze flecks of sand in the wind.

The apprentice *valeyard* looked to the Cardinal and kicked at the bleached dirt. “What’s taking him so long?”

Both Time Lords looked disapprovingly at the emotional boy and the woman by his side.

“It’s evident that this one has no respect for other people’s time.”

“Not a good start for a Time Lord, eh?”

The Cardinal nodded, smoothing more bronze sand from the stiff curve of his ceremonial collar. “Bodes ill for the future. Mark my words, he’ll be late to his own Matrix induction.”

Meanwhile, the little scamp hugged his older friend, and she cherished the contact.

“No more hugs where I’m going,” he mumbled self-pityingly.

She smiled. “Life always seems harder when you’re eight years old.”

That wasn’t much consolation. He trudged away. The guards did not react as he approached their coach.

He heard his name called on the wind. It was a name few would know in the coming centuries. She was calling again. He turned.

“It’s only the beginning,” she told him.

“Oh, not more prophecies,” he groaned.

“Think of them as ... spoilers.” The word was unfamiliar to the boy, but the woman carried on. “You will get your doctorate eventually. And we *will* see each other again.”

It was hardly comforting. She knew the future, and had explained as much as she dared. He had learned the circumstances when she would meet him again, and did not look forward to them.

Dulkis, Tenth Epoch of Ragan Dominion

By the yardstick of Earth’s sun, it was four hundred forty-eight years later. It had been a few years since the Doctor had regenerated for the first time, and he was well into his travels in time and space with his trusty companions Jamie and Zoe. Although presently they didn’t seem likely to last much longer—a cascade of lava was presently engulfing the TARDIS shell, and the mechanisms weren’t allowing him to dematerialise².

“Well, isn’t there any way we can get away?” Zoe asked.

“Well, there is an Emergency Unit, but—well, no, I can’t possibly use that.”

“But this *is* an emergency!”

“But it would move the TARDIS out of the time/space dimension ... out of reality!”

“Well, fine,” Jamie opined. “Reality’s getting too hot anyway!”

The Doctor looked from the Highlander to the twenty-first century mathematics prodigy, their safety finally overriding his gravest reservations. He duly pulled the contraption from the

¹ Archaic Gallifreyan for ‘Learned prosecuting counsel’.

² See *The Dominators* and *The Mind Robber*.

bowels of the console and hooked it up to the panel. One last doubt shook him. “No, look I can’t possibly use this. We don’t know what will happen ...”

Sigma Orielir, Third Interregnum of the Doge of Gabriadeles

On the Terran scale, it was three hundred and twenty-four years later. The Doctor was now in his irrepressible fourth incarnation, and was growing to feel that whatever random destination he, Romana, and K9 arrived at, danger and doom followed. He had shared this intimation with his companions, hoping they would dismiss it as common-or-garden paranoia. But their responses—Romana’s long-suffering nod and K9’s statistical data (“Analysis indicates landings since installation of Randomiser are 79.238% likely to be dangerous, compared to 75.9015% before installation, with a margin of error of 6.77%”)—did not set his mind at ease. And an important matter had arisen, one that desperately required him to override the Randomiser: he really needed a new shirt³.

His familiar tweed frock coat and unfeasibly long scarf lay draped in a corner. Romana observed him fidgeting and fussing while Gilliag Arp, Sigma Orielir’s finest tailor, tossed a tape measure between its pseudopods. The gamine Time Lady’s arms were folded, her head cocked impishly. The Doctor could not help thinking she was enjoying his discomfort.

“You know, the TARDIS can mock up any period of fashion,” she reminded him.

“Huh!” The Doctor breathed sharply through his large and distinguished nose. “It’s like the Mona Lisa all over again. No respect for artistry. I thought I’d taught you to think beyond the narrow confines of Time Lord society. Some people don’t appreciate the value of hand-made ...” He cringed as he registered Gilliag’s pseudopods. “Er, pseudopod-made craft.”

The tailor ignored the Doctor’s *faux pas*. “Indeed not, sir,” Gilliag agreed obsequiously.

Romana wrinkled her nose mockingly at the pair.

The threads wove between the creature’s pseudopods, and before the Time Lords’ eyes, a shirt collar of almost piratical proportions was knitted.

Romana did her best to remain unimpressed. “Not bad.”

“Not bad? A giant collar like that, woven in front of your eyes thanks to the wonders of Orielirian micro-stitching, and you say not bad?” The Doctor pursed his lips, his mad eyes bulging wildly.

Everything had to be so over-the-top with him, Romana noticed. Perhaps that was what endeared him to her so.

As he slipped on his ordinary, and apparently unacceptable, soft-collared white shirt and Gilliag packed up a stack of new and smart-looking shirts it had whittled in a matter of moments, Romana nudged the Doctor about the dark red stitching. It was on the other stack of plainer shirts as well, and even on the Fair Isle-style pullover Gilliag had rattled off. It looked familiar, and now she recognised it. “Is that a question mark?”

³ This journey has gone unrecorded thus far.

“A question mark?” He looked down at the collar and blinked theatrically. “I don’t think so. Is it? No. I think it’s the tailor’s signature ...” He held his hand up and murmured under his breath, “Gilliag seemed keen on it. I didn’t like to say anything ...”

“That’s a first.” Romana raised an eyebrow. “Well, you’re used to making a spectacle of yourself, I suppose a bit of stray punctuation on your neck won’t make that much of a difference.”

His eyes bulged again, but she knew he was in on the joke. But as he looped his multi-coloured scarf around his neck and flipped up the lapels of his coat, he suddenly turned sombre. This was always the difficulty of knowing the Doctor; never being sure when his polarity would change, when situations would flip from light and amusing to deadly serious.

“What is it?” she asked breathlessly.

“Just a nasty thought ...”

“Oh, not another one.”

“If the Randomiser were to fuse with the dematerialisation circuit,” the Doctor continued, “is it possible the failsafes against alternative realities might cease to function?”

Romana shook her head, running through her knowledge of temporal physics and TARDIS engineering. “Of course not.”

“Of course not?” the Doctor parroted, his doubts making him sound snide. “Mathematically ... theoretically ... there *is* a chance, isn’t there?”

Romana whirled through the calculations, and shook her head dismissively. “But it’s so remote ...”

His wide eyes circled around him, taking in every detail of his surroundings to test his grim notion. “How would we know, Romana? Eh?”

“We know what’s real,” she insisted to him. “If we don’t, who would? We’re Time Lords after all.”

“Ha!” the Doctor jeered. “That’s a flimsy hope to hang your hat on.”

To Romana’s great frustration, his sombre turn had chilled her. She wished there was some empirical way to refute what he was saying, but he was right—there was a chance and there might be no way of telling. “Doctor, don’t be ridiculous. I think you enjoy frightening me.”

“Sir,” the tailor interrupted, “if I might make a suggestion ... the new shirt will clash with your coat.”

“Yes ...” The Doctor looked down at the grey tweed, fraying after so few centuries of hard wear. “And after my brown velvet one was eaten by Mandrels too. I was terribly attached to that one.”

“I wonder,” pressed Gilliag, “if you might permit me to make something, a swashbuckling greatcoat, in the Aldeberan Regency style ... perhaps in the Earth colour ‘plum’?”

The Doctor’s musings on reality swiftly left his mind and he beamed broadly at the Oreliran tailor. “Very operatic, Gilliag. Ohh yes, I like the sound of that ...”

Inquisition Station in orbit around Gallifrey, the Rassilon Era

Now it was another hundred and twenty years, and two more regenerations, later. After he disassembled the Randomiser, the Doctor hadn’t been concerned about crossing out of reality in

a while—although at this particular moment he was inside the Matrix, the Time Lords’ virtual equivalent⁴. The Doctor stood over the dead body, too relieved at his lucky survival to ponder the implications of what had happened.

He had seen his own death.

Worse than that, he had caused his own death.

If the Doctor took everything that had recently happened at face value, then the venom-faced body in *valeyard’s* robes that had expired in the hallucinatory ‘Fantasy Factory’ was—will be—himself, six regenerations into the future. If so, his last act, after countless adventures and numberless centuries dedicated to doing the right thing, would be attempting to murder the Time Lords in a twisted and convoluted bid to extend his life. And, the Doctor sighed as he looked from the drab black formal Valeyard collar to his own incomparable patchwork coat, he wouldn’t even do it with any style.

There was no time to stay and sit with those consequences. The Matrix was designed to house disembodied minds—not a place to be running around unless you had a death wish. If the Valeyard was anything to go by, perhaps the Doctor did.

Before he knew it, the Doctor and Mel were safely outside, dealing with the resolution of his trial. The whole affair had seemed petty from the beginning, and now the Inquisitor’s assurance that charges had been dropped rang hollow. Gallifrey was in chaos—the High Council had been deposed over one scandal too many. And the Doctor was happy to leave it that way. They wanted him to stand for Lord President again. He could have laughed—the oldest civilization in the universe and still the Time Lords had no sense of so basic a concept as irony! But that bravado had put him on trial in the first place, so he merely declined politely.

Mel was gabbling in his ear as he led the way to the TARDIS. He hadn’t even met her yet and she was already telling him he needed to get ‘back’ on the exercise bike. Part of him—maybe the part that would one day don black robes and try to murder himself—wished she and the Inquisitor and the whole universe could shut up for a minute and leave him alone to deal with all this. The future was coming at him too quickly to live in the present.

What was the present? Get back in the TARDIS, drop Mel off and meet her again in a few decades, then regenerate, regenerate again, each time running the risk of waking up with that twisted face coming back here to steal his former incarnations?

That wasn’t him. He didn’t recognise himself when he had first walked into that courtroom, the Doctor recalled, and he always knew himself. The Valeyard was some kind of essence, some projection of his own inner evil given form. But he was a living, breathing entity, had some measure of independence. How had he achieved that? When would the Doctor have to deal with the consequences?

Not today, he thought. Today, he tried to insist to himself, was good. He had saved his home planet, he had *not* been executed by his peers, and Peri hadn’t died horribly after all. He insisted to himself that things could always get better, a sentiment this persona found increasingly hard to believe. If he stopped believing that altogether ... well, the results of that way of thinking lay dead inside the Matrix.

His mind raced through all these thoughts, and only now caught up with the present, and the last distasteful words said by an inappropriately cheery Mel.

⁴ See *The Trial of a Time Lord*.

“Carrot juice, carrot juice, carrot juice,” he repeated balefully as he stepped through the TARDIS door.

Perivale, Earth year 1989

Another fifty-seven Earth years had passed, and the Doctor was now a different man—short and Scottish, with an easy-going sense of humour masking an oblique new purpose. Countless adventures had unfolded in the interim, the cares of his former life those of someone else entirely. All that mattered now was that he had defeated the Master for about the hundredth time, closed the door to the Cheetah Planet, and reclaimed his straw hat from Ace⁵. It was a beautiful summer afternoon in Perivale. He didn’t like to say, but the neighbourhood didn’t seem half so bad as she had made out.

But there was no need to stick around. Ace met his gaze, and both knew what the other was thinking.

“Where to now, Ace?”

“Home,” she answered.

“Home?”

“The TARDIS.”

He grinned. “Yes, the TARDIS.”

They linked arms and rambled through the grass. The distant outline of London filled the horizon. In this city, it was sometimes difficult to believe a whole other world existed beyond, and a universe beyond that. But it did, and the Doctor wanted to tell Ace. And Ace wanted to hear.

“There are worlds out there where the sky is burning, and the sea’s asleep and the rivers dream. People made of smoke and cities made of song. Somewhere there’s danger, somewhere there’s injustice, somewhere else the tea’s getting cold. Come on Ace—we’ve got work to do.”

Parallel Dimension of Acheron, Earth year c. 800

By the time he found himself in the ice caves, it had been many ages since he had said goodbye to Ace, since other companions had been and gone, and since he had been called ‘the Doctor’. He had landed centuries before that title had any meaning, and since the court of Camelot mistook him for their recently departed wizard, it was easier all round to go by the name ‘Merlin’. Over time the Doctor had taken to it, even if he felt a bit of a fraud. But now, as the ice nipped painfully at his long sandy beard and stiffened the fronds of his unruly Afghan coat, he saw where this harmless deception led: inevitably, to this fate, the fate he knew from the day he had first landed here. As soon as he took the name of Merlin, and applied his knowledge to aid Arthur

⁵ See *Survival*.

against the mystical forces threatening the young man's kingdom in this dimension, the Doctor knew that one day he was bound to find himself here in this frigid tomb⁶.

He was not so young as he used to be, though more than that he could not remember. A quirk of this regeneration was that his memory seemed to work in the wrong order. It was confusing enough at the best of times, but positively head-spinning right now.

This was no ordinary ice; it had been conjured by the diabolical powers that held sway in this realm. And it did more than numb and freeze the Doctor's body; it burrowed into his soul as well. Everything beyond the wall was opaque and gnarled, but he made out the seductive form of Morgaine retreating in satisfaction at having turned the tables on her old mentor. His backwards memory made him know she would be here, so how she caught him by surprise he would never know. Was he being willfully stupid? He didn't like to think so. Perhaps he wanted to think better of her, hoped she would choose differently at the last moment. Knowing what would happen did not make her betrayal any less disappointing. Though he could not clearly remember, the Doctor suspected in earlier years he would have felt hurt. But no more: by now the Doctor knew a thing or two about human nature.

Still, despite the immediate discomfort of this eternal prison, all was well. Events were taking their inevitable turn, twisting into his past, and into the hands of that other, shorter, Scottish Doctor who would pick up the pieces. If only he could remember how he had sorted it all out at the end of the day ... or rather, the beginning ...

Entombed, alone, and very cold, the Doctor set about getting to work. He couldn't hang around all day in ice caves; he had all those memories lying ahead in his future. Unlike every other creature in this sad universe, he had no time to die.

Now it was earlier, and the Doctor was in his eighth incarnation. He had landed in a strange, disconcerting house, and been surprised by a young boy who stabbed him. He died on the floor, Tamara Scott looking over him in horror, while the boy cackled with delight. Death was inevitable; there was no regeneration.

And now he was in his ninth incarnation, flying out of a decompressing airlock into the icy embrace of deep space. The same boy was there, waving mockingly at him as he floated into the abyss. Death was inevitable; there was no regeneration.

Finally, he was in San Francisco on a trolley-car riding out of control. The same boy was there, and this time, he had talked the Tenth Doctor into giving up, surrendering to the death. This death, too, was inevitable; there was no regeneration⁷.

Then the Doctor awoke.

⁶ See *Battlefield*, and adventures thus far untold ...

⁷ All three deaths take place in *The Doctor Who Project: The Last Doctor Part One: Who Killed Doctor Who?*

Inside the TARDIS, time not applicable

By now, several Earth centuries had passed since the Doctor had left Perivale—but a few more lifetimes remained before he reached Camelot. At this intermediate point, the Doctor was over 2,400 years old and in his eleventh life, and again a considerably different man—taller and dark-skinned, energetic yet more guarded against the dangers of the universe, and consequently less prone to rushing in where angels fear to tread. He was watchful, enthusiastic for the small joys in life, and possessed of a quiet authority.

He sat up in his bed, crammed into a corner of the smallest room in the TARDIS. Aside from a recurring nightmare involving a bunch of his old enemies chasing him around the set of a soap opera (one day he should probably ask Sigmund what *that* meant), he seldom remembered dreams. Usually, life seemed to be a dream.

Those weren't dreams, anyway; they were memories. He was fairly sure that glimpse of the future, with Camelot and Morgaine's trap, was a memory too, just one that hadn't happened yet. 'It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards', as Lewis Carroll's White Queen so wisely observed. Maybe the soap opera run-around was another memory-to-come. It was important to take some effort to distinguish; he might get out of the shower and find himself 957 again, finding however many escapades since he left Perivale now *un*-happened, and the Rani or the Cybermen were waiting for him in Albert Square (if they weren't already).

He removed his pyjamas—the navy-blue silk pair festooned with cats, bought for him by Mel on a trip to Singapore and now beginning to show their age. Then he had a long soak in the shower. Today was a cold-water day. He checked the face in the mirror—thankfully the one he was expecting, still long, superficially young, and gravely handsome; still the same high and wide forehead topped with a stubble of black hair. When you've had eleven faces, he considered, regenerating in your sleep may be a distinct possibility.

The memories unsettled him. They pointed the way to a crooked path whose end he could not see.

That afternoon in 1989 with Ace was as fresh in his mind as if it had been yesterday, but he couldn't for the life of him remember what had happened after. They didn't linger in Perivale, he was sure; Ace was eager to get away to those dreaming rivers and song-people. By then she knew better than to accuse him of making things up. He didn't need to.

And before he knew it, they were in the TARDIS, a course plotted ... for where?

Just as the difference between memory and dreaming was important, the Doctor knew forgetting could be significant too. It was inevitable that a few memories jangled loose every time a regeneration shook up his brain. But they were there somewhere, and if he couldn't find them, *then* he started to worry.

This worry was not helped by his most recent landing, when he became aware that some shadowy foe was hunting down his former incarnations, diverting their timelines, and killing them before they regenerated. Thus far, his three previous selves had died in that manner—the Eighth stabbed, the Ninth flushed out an airlock into deep space, and the Tenth goaded into giving up his life. The enemy had stopped there—the previous seven Doctors seemed to still be out there in the universe living their lives—and the current, Eleventh Doctor pondered his next, inevitable conflict with this shadowy opponent.

He also had the wrath of his people, the Time Lords, to contemplate. They knew something about these attacks on him and this fiddling with his timeline. And the Doctor suspected they wanted to see how it played out, not caring about the impact it had on him. He never regarded his people or his home with much affection, but he could honestly say he had never thought so little of them as he did currently. He would do well to remember they were as great an enemy as any he had faced—and they were many in number, while he had to stand alone.

The Doctor dried himself off and donned a pair of loose navy-blue cotton slacks, his cherry-red shawl-collared fishing sweater, and a comfortable pair of brown Chelsea boots. He paced through the TARDIS corridors, which seemed unusually curvy and winding this morning, and the low amber light radiating from the roundels dim and menacing. His surroundings faded into the background as he racked his brains for those missing memories. He and Ace left Perivale and went ... to that 'Ultimate Challenge' on the planet Glurk, with K9 and Cedric? Or had he finally made it to Bonjaxx' birthday party on Maruthea? Was that before or after they went to Mesopotamia?

They couldn't all have been true, he was certain. Yes, some of those must have been dreams rather than memories (had he and Ace been to Mesopotamia? Was there really a planet Glurk?). So vivid though ... liable to be confusing, especially all these centuries later ...

"Doctor! There you are!"

He hadn't even noticed the raven-haired woman rounding the corridor merrily.

"Ace?"

"Are we playing cards?" she replied, confused.

He blinked, and touched the shoulder of Maggie Weitz, his current companion. "Maggie, I'm terribly sorry. Lost in thought. Did we ever make it to Mesopotamia?"

Maggie frowned. "You look a little squirrely, Doctor. You've been asleep nearly all day. Very unlike you."

"Bad dreams," he replied as he walked past to the control room, the untimely deaths of his earlier selves and the ice caves and that lifeless body in black Time Lord robes in his future lingering in his mind's eye.

Chapter Two

The Short Man With The Gun

The short man crouched in the trees looking down on the clearing. This area of London had once been known as Shoreditch. He had once known it well. But that was long ago—both in his life and in the history of this place. He didn't recognise the city he found himself in. And the parts he recognised too well were all wrong for the time period.

Time was out of joint, and he knew whose fault it was. In a way, he considered with a grim chuckle, it was all his own fault.

He stretched out his legs and shifted in the branch of the unruly oak, the lengthening afternoon shadows swallowing his dark brown jacket. A stray hair had fallen in front of his eye and he brushed it back into place. Sometimes he wondered if he should get a haircut.

Why was it so warm? Wasn't it November? Hadn't these foolish people done something about global warming by now? The old man pushed the Panama hat back on his head, shook off his Paisley-patterned scarf and chocolate brown hacking jacket and draped them on the branch next to him. That also gave him easier access to the Winchester rifle slung over his shoulder.

He smiled grimly at the chirping birds. Once he would have called them strange birds wheeling in an alien sky. From a young age, he had found the image charming. He was almost irritated when they were overshadowed by a strident wheezing, groaning sound a half-mile away.

The little man shifted in the tree again, narrowing his icy blue eyes at the sight of a police box grinding into existence in the wide, flat clearing.

The image on the TARDIS scanner had circled so many times, Maggie was getting dizzy.

“What's the matter?”

The Doctor gave up twisting the scanner knob and tapped impatiently at a row of buttons on the console. In response to his man-handling, it groaned at him. "Something's knocked us off-course. I was aiming for Uruk ..." He half-smiled wistfully. "... hoping it might jog my memory."

Maggie grinned as she saw a distant row of Gothic spires. "Well, unless Uruk has a clock-tower called Big Ben, I'd say you missed it and ended up in merry old England."

The uncertain smile drained from the Doctor's face, and he circled around the console, reading each dial with mounting desperation. Maggie crossed over to him, confused. "I always thought you liked England, what with that accent and all."

"I do usually," he mumbled darkly.

"I think you got up on the wrong side of bed," she declared.

"Only one side."

"Hmm?"

"My bed's against the wall. There's only one side to get up on ... unless I sleep upside down."

"Oh, Doctor, stop being so weird! If something's bothering you, you should come out and say it, don't keep wittering on!"

He finally looked up from the console. "The date is the twenty-third of November 2963. One thousand years after I left this planet with my granddaughter Susan, and those two Earth teachers, Barbara and ... Chesterfield. Whoever knocked us off course is either sentimental or trying to send me a message." He crossed to the white Time Lord message cube that had rested on the occasional table for the last little while⁸. "And whoever sent me this message mentioned this same date too."

Maggie knew the Doctor had been preoccupied with that message and the person who sent it, especially since that person had apparently changed his past by murdering three of his former selves. She wished she could say something to comfort him. "Anything else I should know about London in the thirtieth century?"

"It shouldn't even *be* London. It and the rest of the planet are completely flooded and ruined from thousands of years of human rapacity, creating a vast and inconceivably desolate slum fought over by those too poor to live anywhere else, while the affluent look down from the floating Overcities in the miserable glory days of the Earth Empire."

That image of her planet's future hardly charmed Maggie, but she decided to take the Doctor's word for it. "I know better than to question your history, Doctor. But what's wrong? Any data from the TARDIS?"

The console groaned again as the Doctor tried to extract information. "Not a sausage, Maggie." He shrugged his trusty emerald-green balmacaan around his shoulders and marched to the door. "Well, may as well pop our heads out. It looks like a lovely morning."

The little man balanced the rifle on his knee and took aim at the information panel on the police box's front door. For a long time, nothing happened. He wondered if the fellow inside had some

⁸ The message cube was sent to the Doctor at the end of *The Doctor Who Project: M.O.A.B.*

sixth sense. No, he was probably checking his readings and confused about the wrongness of this timeline.

Finally, tentatively, the door creaked open.

The Doctor looked around, and breathed in some remarkably fresh English air. "Very worrying, Maggie. It hasn't been this clear for nearly *two* thousand years. Can't be many cars or power plants running. Dear me, positively bucolic!" Again, his features clouded with doubt. "Which is, of course, all wrong."

Maggie crouched down at the grass faintly rustling in the breeze. "Well, at least this is a scrap of good luck." She showed the Doctor the green leaf she had picked: a four-leaf clover. Her positive feeling turned odd, however, when she saw the field littered with similar clovers, all with four leaves.

The Doctor took the clover and nodded. "Lucky for you, maybe, but on Gallifrey they're ten-a-penny. I wonder if our gracious host planted all these to make me feel at home."

"What part of London is this?"

The Doctor sniffed, orienting himself from the distant landmarks. "Shoreditch. The very spot I left in 1963 ... of course, back then it was a scrapyards. I.M. Foreman." He smiled sadly. "All the things I've forgotten and yet a name on an old blue gate sticks in my mind. I wonder why."

The Doctor walked away from Maggie, his eyes filled with the same distraction she saw in the TARDIS corridors. It was at such moments that she remembered his great age, and saw that older being, usually buried within his energetic and ebullient personality, come to the fore. She had grown used to such moments, but it still felt acutely intrusive to witness them.

"Know any good coffee shops nearby?" she asked tritely.

"Hmm ... " The Doctor performed an almost comical pirouette on the spot, his eyes narrowed the whole time, exactly as he had been spinning the scanner eye. "Ever get the feeling you're being observed?"

"All the time, when I'm around you. I just thought it was common-or-garden paranoia. Right now, though ..." Maggie looked off into the distance. There didn't appear to be any people at all. She was prepared to laugh off their shared paranoia when she caught sight of a dark blip against the rural landscape. The dark blue dome at the top reminded Maggie briefly of the TARDIS, before she realised it was an English beat copper. She pointed it out, and the Doctor's face sank again.

"Wrong again!" he cried. "This era is policed by wantonly corrupt Imperial Adjudicators, not ... Dixon of Dock Green."

The policeman caught sight of them and approached in that curiously formal wide-legged stride, arms folded behind his back, that primed Maggie to imagine the first words out of his mouth would be "'Ello, 'ello, 'ello."

"I think I've met him before," the Doctor murmured.

"Do you think he'll wonder why we're loitering around a police box?"

The Doctor gave her another distracted smile. "If he recognises the TARDIS, then we'll really be in trouble."

But the constable did not get close enough to say anything. He locked his eyes on the time travellers, and performed the most extraordinary behaviour yet. He pressed his thumb against his nose, waved the four fingers, and blew a raspberry. Not content with this rude display, he then started flapping his arms like wings, making chicken noises.

They had barely been outside of the TARDIS doors for ten minutes, and Maggie was already feeling worn down with anxiety. She and the Doctor stared dumbfounded at the copper, the spectacle too jarring to be comic, but too trivial to be threatening.

Then a gunshot rang through the air.

The little man uttered an oath in his home planet's tongue, rolling the 'R' sound with particular anger. Perhaps it was his deep-seated distaste for firearms, a moment of nerves, or a sudden remorse at the sight of the young, or rather old, fellow. Whatever the cause, that hesitation cost him the victory he had hoped for. Then again, if the younger man in his sights—the Doctor—were to die, that victory would be a tad Pyrrhic.

The shot had sailed harmlessly through the round-shouldered Raglan sleeve of the young man's bright green coat, causing it to puff up in a cloud of pressure. It thudded uselessly against the TARDIS door. The Ship's Prussian blue paintwork was not even chipped.

The chap looked his way, and the little man's guilt gnawed into him more deeply. Seeing the eyes of the victim—especially when they were *those* familiar eyes—weakened his resolve still further. He was so convinced of this course of action, until he actually had the weapon in his hands. Never had his abhorrence of violence felt like such a liability.

But this was no time for self-recrimination. Over the brow of the hill, he now saw the menacing outline of six round silver domes, all swivelling in unison to trace the origin of the shot. This was no time to get mixed up with *them*.

He slung the Winchester back over his shoulder, grabbed his jacket and the straw Panama hat, and nimbly hopped back to ground level. His two-toned shoes absorbed the jump perfectly. He raced into the woodland and crouched low as they implacably rolled past him.

"Hmmp!" he cried in triumph. Of all the things he had to worry about at the moment, his greatest enemies finding him was relatively trivial.

The Doctor had grabbed the constable by the shoulders and shook him. If it were anyone else, Maggie would have been troubled at the Doctor's force. "Pull yourself together, man! Didn't you see that?" He yanked the perforated sleeve. "That's a bullet hole."

"Sir, why don't you come with me and we'll sort the whole thing out?"

"Cranfield, isn't it? Reg Cranfield?"

The constable's cheeks reddened in flattery. "Kind of you to know my name, Doctor."

“Know your name? Reg my dear fellow, don’t you remember meeting me in *nineteen* sixty-three⁹? Your beat was Shoreditch, wasn’t it? With Laura Clifford and ...” He trailed off, saddened by Cranfield’s blank expression.

“As I say, sir, perhaps you’d like to accompany me to the station?”

“You don’t think it’s a tad odd for you to still be on this beat a thousand years later? You’re surely due to retire, Reg.”

Cranfield blinked. “I can only repeat that perhaps we should go down to the station, sir.”

“You’re not arresting me, are you?”

Constable Cranfield looked affronted at the suggestion. “Arrest you, sir? Today? I could hardly do that. Not today, Doctor.”

The Doctor’s jaw set. “What’s so special about today?”

“Oh, sir. Don’t be coy. Come along. You too, Miss Weitz.”

“You know who I am?” Maggie asked.

“Course I do. Maggie Weitz. Constable Reg Cranfield, at your service. We’re honoured to have you visit from Canada. Not quite as far as some people travelled, though.”

As if in time with this remark, the travellers felt a sickly shadow cast from behind them. Maggie turned around to find six squat tank-like vehicles, silver with black hemispheres studding their bases, three attachments twitching and jerking with a creepy parody of life. Maggie instinctively stepped away from them, only to find herself nearly stumbling into the arms of the oblivious police constable.

“You know the Daleks of course,” Constable Cranfield continued cheerily, indicating the uncanny objects. “All the way from Skaro they’ve come, just to pay their respects.”

“How kind,” the Doctor tensely replied. “Pay respects? Care to explain that one, Dalek?”

“*Doctor,*” the black-liveried Dalek leader rasped. “*You will accompany us.*”

“Where? Is it more convenient to exterminate me in town?”

“*You will ... not be exterminated,*” one of the silver Daleks admitted, sounding personally disappointed. “*We are here to welcome you to London.*” It lifted its grating mechanical bark at the last syllable, entirely failing to sound as biddable as it intended.

“*Welcome to London! Welcome to London!*” the group of Daleks shrieked.

As if on the Daleks’ cue, a sleek black 1968 Daimler DR450 limousine rolled up to the edge of the grassland. A uniformed chauffeur bowed and opened the back door.

“There are six of you, plus Maggie, Reg, and myself. Won’t it be a bit small for all nine of us?”

“*You will travel by Daimler,*” another silver Dalek commanded. “*We will follow.*”

“*Proceed,*” one of its fellows insisted prissily.

The Doctor brushed past them and climbed into the car. “Typical Daleks. They can’t roll out the red carpet properly.”

⁹ See *The Doctor Who Project: A Mild Curiosity in a Junkyard*.

The car drove away, and the Daleks trundled after it. Constable Reg Cranfield carried on about his beat, idly waving his truncheon, as if nothing strange at all had occurred. Nor did he consider the oddity that his beat was now an uninhabited stretch of field.

The little man watched them leave. When the forest was silent and still once again, he emerged from his hiding place and scampered down the hills, stopping at the door of the TARDIS.

He paused a moment, ostensibly to catch his breath, but mostly to admire the Ship. Oh, she had modified her plasmic shell subtly, but she was essentially unchanged. He was glad that the young chap had the good taste not to repair the faulty camouflage—it was reassuring beyond measure, with so much of his life and himself unravelled, lost, and destroyed, to see his old friend in her familiar form.

He reached into the pocket of his chocolate brown jacket and extracted his key. He slid it into the lock, pushed the door open, and stepped inside.

“Hmm, dear me, dear me,” he murmured to himself as he took in the glass floor, the split-level design crammed with added alcoves, the wall-sized scanner and the sleek controls added to the console. “When will he learn to stop redecorating?”

He flung the hated Winchester rifle onto a nearby coffee table with all the contempt the weapon deserved, and walked in an appreciative circle around the console. His fingers fluttered on the lapels of his jacket.

“Navigation faults seem to have been corrected from my day. Very clever. I knew I’d figure them out eventually. Oh well, can’t shilly-shally about here all day, can I?”

The controls may have been modified, but he was the man who modified them. Thus, it took no effort at all for this younger Doctor—his seventh incarnation—to key in the coordinates and dematerialise.

His destination couldn’t have been easier. The scanner was locking on to the other fellow’s ... well, to his brain patterns.

As the Daimler made its leisurely way into Central London, Maggie stared out the window at the scenery. It was not the metropolis of her time: great swathes of the land was reclaimed by grass and woodland, and only when they neared the River Thames did Maggie see parts she recognised. The Houses of Parliament stood proud, and Big Ben struck the hour as if especially for them. The elegant palaces of Whitehall and Downing Street had been restored to their glory, and even the large Ferris Wheel right on the river, which Maggie took to be an alien addition, was identified by the Doctor as the London Eye installed in the early twenty-first century.

The Doctor had tried to make conversation with the chauffeur, but other than finding out the man’s name was Geoffrey and that the weather was very pleasant for the time of year, he remained tight-lipped. With no way to get any information, and after he had stopped looking out the back window every few seconds out of fear that the Daleks might open fire, the Doctor assumed at least a façade of relaxation. Every so often, he pointed out a landmark, and mentioned some friend he had met there or good deed he had done: in the distance, a place called Croydon was home to Sarah Jane Smith; St. Paul’s Cathedral was where he had battled Cybermen; an anonymous downtown concrete block housed UNIT Headquarters; Charing Cross Underground station was where he had foiled the Dinosaur Invasion.

“Don’t forget Robin Hood’s house,” Maggie teased.

“Oh yes! And it’s all just as it was,” he noted. “The Daleks could never have done this ... even if they’d wanted to. When they invaded Earth in the twenty-second century, they reduced it to rubble like the pathetic conquerors they are. There’s a ... constructive aspect to this that’s entirely unfamiliar to me.”

“Well, I wouldn’t know the difference,” Maggie pointed out. “I haven’t been here since that time we stopped in around the 2020s, when we saw that awful Shard building.”

The Doctor’s eyes widened. “Good grief, that’s right. Oh, if we were here under different circumstances Maggie, I’d love to show you the sights. There’s no city in all of time and space that’s like London. Why, around that next corner near Leicester Square is the Criterion Grill. I had a lovely dinner there in 1881. I met a fellow called Stamford, and his mutual friend ...”

He left the anecdote unfinished. As they drove along Westminster Bridge Road, more silver Daleks trundled the other way, and their lack of threat appeared itself a threat. In the water, a fanged aquatic reptile—the Loch Ness Monster, Maggie assumed—loomed over their heads, some bright orange puckered creatures astride its back waving. It emitted an eerie roar before it dipped back below and continuing its swim along the Thames.

“I wonder where everyone is? Oh, the city is hopping with all these former invaders and would-be conquerors, but the few roads that have been restored are entirely clear of pedestrians and traffic. Not a Londoner to be seen. Surely the Daleks didn’t exterminate them all after restoring the city? The population of Earth in this time is *supposed* to be over thirty billion. After reducing their own planet to slag, ash, and clinker, the sensible people either got up and headed to other planets, outside the Empire’s clutches, or else tried to lord the warped principles on others. And yet I’d still give anything to see that horrible nightmare world appear before our eyes right now.”

Maggie hated to mention it, but could not resist. “Well ... is it too much to wonder if it’s so bad? OK, so history’s changed.”

“Bad enough.”

“OK, fair enough, but I haven’t heard a single good thing about the ‘real’ history of the thirtieth century. Forget good. Nothing even rises above ‘not-awful’. I mean, the Earth Empire ... that sounds like the absolute worst traits of humanity taken out to space.”

He bobbed his head to consider her point. “It is.”

“Who’s to say this couldn’t turn out better?” She answered her own question at the sight of his stony face. “Don’t tell me. You. As a Time Lord.”

“Maggie, I wish I could feel good about it, for the exact reasons you describe. I’ve seen this city and many like it, whole worlds even, founder and collapse and it always saddens me. But if that didn’t happen ... it wouldn’t be history, it would be stasis. And tedious though it is to point out, I do have over twenty-four hundred years of experience. Enough to know, and to have seen first-hand, that simply moving things back to a previous glory age doesn’t solve problems, it merely creates new ones.”

Maggie held up her hands. “Sue me for playing devil’s advocate.”

They laughed, and the Doctor told her about happier times and places in his beloved London. He was not interrupted from this train of thought until the car slowly approached some massive gold-filigreed gates. Maggie recognised the building beyond as Buckingham Palace and remembered the last time she had visited a palace.

“A long way off Henry the Eighth. Is there still a king or a queen in this time?”

The Doctor did not get a chance to answer, as for the first time since they had landed they saw a sizeable group of Londoners. They swarmed the car, and the chauffeur pushed past them to open the door.

Some wore long scarves and frock coats, others wore frilly shirts and bowties under velvet jackets, cricket sweaters and dark starry-patterned waistcoats. One or two had baggy 1940s tweed sack suits, and a few had question marks on their shirt collars and tank tops. There was a certain sartorial similarity among them, hit home when Maggie saw the odd outlier dressed in emerald green balmacaans and fishing sweaters, some even wearing the Doctor’s familiar maroon watch cap on top despite the balmy heat of the day. Amid their inarticulate screams, they held plastic replicas of the sonic screwdriver in the air and struck various self-conscious poses.

The Doctor’s eyes bulged as he took them all in. “I don’t believe it. They’re all dressed ... well, like me. Or like how I used to.”

Not everyone was dressed like the Doctor. Others wore school uniforms and fancy dress, yellow pyjamas with gold stars, homemade army uniforms with cardboard UNIT crests, and bomber jackets. One or two even wore blue dresses styled with the barred windows and ‘POLICE PUBLIC CALL BOX’ of the TARDIS itself. The ones wearing regular clothes showed their loyalty by holding other objects from the Doctor’s world; he was most galled to see small plastic effigies of his mortal enemies, the Daleks, in the hands of many of the children swarming the car. Maggie could scarcely imagine such behaviour, until it dawned on her that she had seen it often in her own world, before the odder world of the Doctor subsumed it.

“They’re fans!” Maggie exclaimed.

The Doctor looked blankly at her.

“My cousin Larry went to a *Star Trek* convention in Spokane one summer in 1990 or so. He met Leonard Nimoy. They were like this, dressed as Mister Spock and Captain Picard and the rest, and going crazy when they met the real people from the show.”

“Mister Spock?” the Doctor repeated dumbly.

“Well, I thought it was a bit of a joke, but I have to say even I got a little light-headed when Nimoy said hello to me.”

The Doctor listened to this in utter bewilderment. “But what are these people fans *of*?”

“You!”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Maggie. I’m not a pop star and I’m not Leonard Nimoy. I’m nobody. That’s the whole point. The very idea of people making a fuss over me ... quite repellent.”

She smiled and patted his knee. “I kind of think you deserve it, Doc. You’ve saved the universe so many times, you *deserve* some people making a fuss of you. Come on! Just once in two thousand four hundred years of saving the galaxy?”

The Doctor looked mildly ill at the idea.

A sleekly suited woman wearing dark glasses pushed past the crowd and nodded a greeting to the Doctor and Maggie. “Welcome,” she greeted them in an American accent. “My name is Julie and I’ll be looking after you during your stay. Right this way, Doctor.”

“Er ... thank you, Julie.” The Doctor walked through the gate. As he passed, he smiled and shook the extended hands of these fans of his. He tried to say hello and ask them their names, but Julie beckoned him past them.

“Doctor, we are on a strict time table here. We don’t want to keep ... well, the person who has organised this doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

“How immature of that person. Oh very well. I’m anxious to meet this mysterious organiser.” The Doctor smiled and waved, apologising as he walked away. Maggie could tell he would rather be out there with the regular people than pushed away into the palace.

Julie led the time travellers through a maze of gold filigree and chintz, even less talkative than Geoffrey the chauffeur as she charted her efficient course. They finally came to rest in a grand stateroom. A table had been laid with refreshments, and she indicated two chairs and apologetically excused herself, tactfully avoiding mentioning what would happen next, whom they could expect, or how long they would be waiting.

“More like a doctor’s office ... er, no offence.” Maggie stretched out in the large padded couch.

The Doctor was sipping from a China teacup. His brows raised in approval. “Well, if there is indeed a monarch in residence, it isn’t George the Fourth. He always liked his tea absolutely stewed.”

Maggie finished her cup, feeling a bit of calm returning along with it, and examined the large bowl of primary-coloured candies on the table. The Doctor reached into the bowl and sifted through the assortment until he located an orange one. “Jelly babies.” He bit into the sweet, and offered Maggie one. As she chewed on it, he prowled around the room, unable to settle.

“Feeling more ghosts?”

He nodded. “And I have a feeling we won’t be greeted by anyone we’d wish to see.”

“How right you are, Doctor.”

Entering from one door was a suave and saturnine man wearing an Elizabethan tunic in black leather, buttoned to his throat. The black clothes, black pointed Van Dyke beard, and the large black pupils of his hypnotic staring eyes suggested his heart too might be black. He was trying a bit too hard, Maggie thought, and his attire and his calculated villainy disconcertingly reminded her of Edmund Blackadder. He gave a dastardly chuckle at the Doctor’s expression.

When he regained his composure, the Doctor asked, “You’ve regenerated again? You give all of us middle-aged Time Lords hope, you jackanapes. Which incarnation is this, thirty going on thirteen?”

The question remained unanswered as another door swung open, and in wheeled more silver Daleks, this time led by a withered man in the bottom half of a black Dalek casing, with a single blue mechanical eye and a single skeletal hand.

Behind them pushed in several squat soldiers in armour, their identical mud-coloured faces like malevolent potatoes. Their leader—Linx himself, the Doctor was sure—stuck his tongue out in greeting.

“The Master, Davros, and the Fifth Fleet of the Sontaran Space Corps? Oh my! This must be quite an occasion.” The enemies advanced further into the reception room, crowding around the Doctor. Though she was relieved that no death-rays were pointed her way, Maggie was concerned at her friend’s reaction to all this. His sorrow and detachment had given way to a disconcerting humour; even now he was barely suppressing the mocking smile on his face. He

seemed happier now than he did when they were in that peaceful field. Yet the happiness had a malicious, not contented, edge.

“You would do well,” Davros advised, “to assess this situation carefully, Doctor. You know less than you might think.”

The Doctor jammed his hands into the pockets of his black rope slacks and ranged around the room. “Very Socratic of you to say, Davros. What do I know? I know none of you could have made this distortion of time possible. Even apart from the scale, it simply isn’t your style. There’s something too methodical about it, too tactical. Too personal as well. None of you *know* me well enough to pull this off like you have. Not even the Master. If it was designed to get under my skin ... it’s succeeded.”

“And what does that suggest?” the Master pressed. “Who would be so malevolent, so calculated, to hurt you even more skillfully than your greatest enemies?”

“Myself, of course,” the Doctor replied flatly, the joy drained from his voice and his expression.

Maggie swallowed.

“Correct, Doctor.”

Another door opened. Through it shone a bright light, casting the figure in its front into deep shadow.

“The Valeyard, I presume?”

“Nah.” The figure stepped away from his stark illumination into the room. The Doctor took a step back in undisguised shock. This person could not have been less like the desiccated prosecutor. He was a boy, outwardly all of ten years old. The Doctor recalled himself as a wan, sickly child with overlong hair, whereas this lad was burly for his young external age, with a dark, tightly curled mane on top of his oversized head, and dressed in a child-sized Regency coat and dapper polka-dot cravat.

But the Doctor had seen the boy before: gleefully killing him three times over, in that stately home, on the freighter in deep space, and in San Francisco.

“No, Doctor,” the boy replied. “My existence cancels out the Valeyard. I’m good—I’m better than good, I’m the *best*. I sent you that Time Lord message cube, sunshine. I wanted you to see my handiwork first-hand.”

“Proud of what you’ve done, aren’t you?” the Doctor asked bitterly.

“And why not? Can you think of anything more impressive? This here is our greatest victory, yours *and* mine. Look around! I have restored our favourite planet, Earth, to its former glory, made it the most important planet in the universe and the center of an infinitely stretching, eternally prosperous empire. I have brought peace to all of time and space by the simple expediency of conquering it. How do you do, Doctor? I am the Last Doctor.”

Chapter Three

Is There A Doctor In The House?

As the afternoon drew on, the Skarasen's swim through the Thames was interrupted by the Myrka. The Zygons and Silurians on either side were on the verge of getting peeved, but despite some heated debate over the right of way, both stopped short of coming to blows. It was, after all, a special day. And they were happy to pose for photos with the many fans mingling on the riverbank. This public service performed, the Silurians stuck to the right lane and the Zygons to the left. So much for beating the traffic up to Scotland, Broton considered grimly. They were further frustrated when they saw the thick white spray clogging up the tributary leading to the Churn. The North Sea weed creature was abroad again. But the Zygons did their best to remain patient.

Aside from seeing *Four Weddings and a Funeral* too many times, Maggie didn't know much about English accents, and she knew there was no reason the Doctor, as a Gallifreyan, should speak anything like Hugh Grant. The deep, pleasant tones of her Doctor may *sound* English, but like many things about him, his voice was an alien approximation of human behaviour. And if the boy in front of them was some future version of her friend, maybe that approximation explained why his voice sounded so phoney. This 'Last Doctor' spoke with a jarring stage-Cockney accent, like Dick van Dyke.

The boy snapped his chubby fingers. "Right, Beardy," he commanded the Master, "better get into Parliament. I want that bill passed yesterday, got it?"

The Doctor looked from the sniping boy to the fallen Time Lord. How could he bow and scrape to his sworn enemy? Where was the old fire, the scheming nature?

"I understood today is a holiday," the Doctor said. "Shouldn't Parliament get the day off as well?"

"I am a humble civil servant," the Master replied. "And I will obey *you*."

"Quite right." The boy clicked his fingers again. "I make a good point though. Wouldn't be fair to make you all work. Then again, you like making speeches, don't you?"

The Master nodded.

Clucking his tongue, the boy finally decided, "Then again, maybe I have been working you lot a bit too hard. OK then, *quid pro quo*. Pass the bill unanimously, and you get the rest of the day off."

The Master bowed and swept from the room. "Your wish is my command, Doctors."

"As for you, Davros, I want those last few reality-tampering bombs on Gallifrey, right? Hop it back to Skaro, eh? Oh ... *New Skaro*, of course." He nudged the Doctor. "Remember what the Hand of Omega did, eh? We taught 'em a lesson that time, didn't we?"

Even the fanatical Kaled scientist did no more than nod his assent and withdraw, the Daleks meekly following. The Sontaran commander received the most ridiculous order yet: to organise a spaceship so the boy could show his previous incarnation around the planet.

Somehow, the air in the room grew tenser after the Doctor's enemies left the room. The boy finally yawned and took a seat, motioning the Doctor to do the same. "Well, don't stand on ceremony. Take off your coat, pull up a pew, and relax ..."

The Doctor reluctantly took a seat, defiantly folding the tails of his balmacaan over his legs. "I'm perfectly relaxed as I am, thank you."

"Suit yourself. Some people think it's awfully strange, leaving a coat on when you walk into someone's front room."

The Doctor crossed his arms. "Not someone's front room—the Royal Family's. And they can keep it, it's certainly not to my taste."

Hovering over the settee, Maggie cleared her throat, and swallowed as the boy's eyes looked her up and down. She could see something alien in the heart of this boy, but was it the essence of the man she had now known for years, and considered her closest friend? True, the Doctor sometimes let down his mask of bonhomie and she saw something otherworldly—at times even scary—lurking beneath. Did she see that quality in this figure? The accent had her on her guard. There was some kind of trickery about all this, everything since they had landed starting with that field of four-leaf clovers, and she was not going to be persuaded that all was as it appeared.

She picked up on a relatively incidental detail. "You made the Master the Prime Minister? I've heard the Doctor—my Doctor—talk about him. Isn't he, like, an evil Time Lord?"

"Yeah, yeah. But he has experience. He was once the president of the United States. And Britain needed a change of government. Being a Canadian, you might not appreciate how sick they were of the lot before. There was this lady PM before him, and she didn't listen to me. I hate being ignored. Can't stand it." He grinned at the Doctor. "Don't we?"

"Maybe that's a new trait for your regeneration. What number are you on now? Not as many as the Master, I hope?"

Maggie was heartened that the other Doctor seemed unsettled by her Doctor's unwavering stare. He quickly rose from the chair and moved about the room like an ant trying to evade a magnifying glass. Also, that question seemed like it should have a straightforward answer: he should have been able to say he was the Twelfth, or the Sixteenth, or the Five Hundred and

Seventh Doctor. The fact that he couldn't, or wouldn't, answer further suggested he was hiding something. And if there was some deception, there was a chance to figure this situation out.

"I've been the Doctor a long time, chum. Can't remember all the details. Probably shouldn't share 'em with you anyway. That's a surprise in store for you, I reckon." The boy dropped into another silence, and shifted in his seat desperate to change the subject. "Maggie, I bet you'd like to meet the missus, wouldn't you?" He backed to the door and bellowed down it: "Daisy! Daisy!"

A few seconds later a woman of about twenty entered. Her blonde hair looked dyed, and she had a buxom build squeezed into a tight sweater and skirt. Maggie didn't like to be judgemental, but she looked too young, too vacant, and too brassy for her Doctor to ever take an interest in. And this boy did seem interested in her in a ... carnal way. She bent down and pecked the boy on the cheek.

"Missus?" Maggie repeated, looking at the odd couple. She hoped it was a figure of speech.

"I only *look* young, mate," the last Doctor assured her, dashing her hope as he eyed Daisy up and down lasciviously. "I'm more than quadruple your Doc's age."

"That's nearly ten thousand years old!" the Doctor estimated disbelievingly. "And you've chosen to look and act like this? Does the phrase 'arrested development' mean anything to you, young man?"

"Age is just a number, mate. And who are you to talk? I'm more mature than you'll ever be. I've made a big life decision, I have. 'Bout time I settled down, stopped that vagabond life of ours. Haven't you ever thought of it?"

The Doctor looked at the scene and was reminded, involuntarily, of that goodbye on the hills of South Gallifrey in his childhood ... his actual childhood. He remembered what he looked like that day, and the face was nothing like this sullen and bratty little upstart.

Yet the boy's question nettled him. "All the time," he answered honestly.

"Tragic, isn't it?" the boy asked Maggie. "You know the story, Magglesworth. I'm sure I told you some time. When I left my home planet with Susan I was looking for somewhere better. And I expected I'd just land there. Y'know, I'd randomly plonk down on some planet, look out the TARDIS window and say, 'Oi! I've made it to paradise, I have!' But then the travelling took over. It became so about the journey the destination grew less and less important. Did I first realise it when Susan left? Well, it didn't matter. Others came and went to keep me company. They all found their ideal places and times to be. But I'd never make that plunge with 'em. The journey became ... a compulsion, an addiction. Almost as if I'd forgotten my objective altogether."

"But I never allowed myself ... my life hasn't been exactly—"

"Excuses, excuses. I remember 'em all. Me, I'm doing something about it," the boy interrupted sharply. "And not before time. Daisy Wyler, allow myself to introduce ... myself." He cringed at the tongue slip that had led to this awkward phrasing, and carried on. "This is my eleventh incarnation, and this is his friend Maggie Weitz."

"Charmed, I'm sure," Daisy replied curtly in a flat Essex accent. She smacked her lips, and Maggie realised she was chewing gum. Maggie felt a protective urge toward her Doctor when the blonde woman looked him up and down and fluttered her eyelashes. "You never told me you used to be such a good-looking bloke," she teased the boy.

To Maggie's relief, the Doctor bristled at her flirtation. "Young? Bloke indeed? My dear girl, I'm over two thousand four hundred years old. How young did your little boy-toy here say *he* was? Because he's actually over four hundred times your age, I'll reckon."

"Oh, Doc, let's be mature about this. Daisy, I'm going to show myself the paradise I've made of Earth."

"Give 'im something to aspire to, yeah?" Daisy replied cattily.

"Yeah, yeah. Linxy's giving me one of his open-topped Sontaran victory cruisers. We'll be taking off from the landing pad in about twenty minutes. Meantime, d'you want to show Maggie around the palace? I don't think the Doc ever got a chance to show her London."

Maggie wondered if he was remembering his younger self, or merely guessing. The doubts crept in, but she was not going to be persuaded. In her jeans pocket, she clenched that four-leaf clover tightly in her fist. She saw nothing of her friend in him. But his words struck an ominous note: how long before they said goodbye, and how long after that might this boy come into being? The boy was four times as old as the Doctor, so it would be long after she was dead anyway ...

"Oh, oh, oh!" the boy cried out. "I can't believe I nearly forgot the best bit. A surprise for you, Maggie."

"I don't like surprises." *And I'm almost certainly not going to like any you come up with,* she added in her head.

"Nah, don't be like that!" He clapped his hands, and the far door opened again. Maggie was put in mind of a French farce with all these entrances and exits.

And then her heart stopped, and every silly thought in her head slipped away.

There he was.

"Ollie?"

The man humbly entered the room. He was tall and his flat nose reddened with sunburn, like it was the last day he went into work. He was even wearing that same flannel shirt. Maggie remembered ironing it for him the night before, saying goodbye in that morning, never thinking that it would be the last time.

"Maggie!"

Suddenly, his awkward posture was gone. As gleefully as a child, Ollie raced across the stateroom and hugged and kissed her.

Maggie instantly surrendered to his embrace and kissed him back, holding that moment for as long as she dared, but knowing when she pulled free, the spell would be broken with the simple question: "How?"

She knew it further when she looked to the Doctor, his eyes wide in disbelief and horror. If time travel was essentially magic to a mere mortal like her, this boy was irresponsibly practicing the darkest of Dark Arts, merely as a sideshow prank.

"It's me, Maggie," Ollie said. "I know you don't believe it, but he did it. Your Doctor friend did it."

She pointed at the boy. "*He* did?"

Ollie nodded. "He said you used to be good friends."

"That's right," the boy said. "And more than anything I want you to be happy." He scowled at the Doctor. "He could've done it, you know. Bending those silly old Laws of Time. It's not so hard once you get started."

“How?” she finally asked. “You undid his death? Stopped that undiagnosed tumour from rupturing? How?”

“Bit of flim-flam, Maggie. Don’t think about it too hard. You and Daisy, and Ollie ... you go for a bit of a walk. Me and me—*old* me, that is ...” The Last Doctor clapped the Doctor’s shoulder. “We’ll step out onto the terrace and say hi to the fans.”

The one sign that it was November was that by a quarter past five, the sky was darkening. But there was a different quality to the sunset, and when Maggie asked about it, Daisy’s response was as mad as everything else that had happened that day.

“That’ll be the moon.”

“What about it?”

“Aw, of course, you haven’t been ‘ere for a while. The Doctor blew it up a while back.”

“Blew up the moon?” Ollie repeated dumbly.

“Yeah,” Daisy replied without affect. The moon clearly meant nothing to her.

“Was that wise?” Maggie pressed

“Sure. He had to. He had a good reason. Always does, the Doctor. Might seem like he’s just making it up as he goes along, but if he did it, it must have been the right thing to do. It always works out for the best.”

“Does it?” Ollie asked, the question directed more at Maggie than Daisy.

“Actually ...yes,” Maggie answered. “Daisy’s right there.” But she wondered how true that held. Her Doctor always seemed more considered, less rash. These expansive gestures seemed to be made as some kind of spectacle for its own sake; and Maggie wished she could explain to Ollie how unlike the spirit of the Doctor such spectacle was. Why, the only thing more out of character would be if she saw him toting a gun.

“He’s great, isn’t he?” Daisy gabbled to Maggie. “Imagine my luck, getting to meet a hero like the Doctor. Well, *our* luck, eh sister?”

Maggie nodded. Her eyes remained on Ollie, who was shrinking away self-consciously from the gaze. Just like he always did. He was doing what he used to do. But Maggie knew enough to know that this was just as likely to be perfect mimicry as the genuine article.

She left Ollie for the moment, deciding she could learn more from Daisy. “We don’t have to talk about the Doctor, Daisy.”

“No, but I like to!”

“Me too, but let’s talk about you. What did you do? Who are you?”

She smacked her gum again and curled a length of peroxide hair around her lacquered finger. “Aw, y’know, just an average ordinary London shopgirl, aren’t I? But I learned that about myself thanks to him. I’m special, you know. *We’re* special.” The queasy thought of romance went thankfully unspoken. Daisy continued, “And I defeated the Zarbi one time. They were making all sorts of threats against Borough Market, I think it was. But any little nuisances that spring up, he can take care of. All of Earth knows he’s their protector.”

“Nice friend, Maggie,” Ollie said with a chuckle. “He sounds like Space-Age Jesus.”

Daisy snorted with derision. “It’s the thirtieth century, mate. Nobody ‘round here believes in God anymore.”

“You wouldn’t need to, would you?” Maggie pressed, surprised at how bitter she sounded. “You all worship the Doctor instead. Quite the cult following. My Doctor would hate that. He’s no God, he’s just a person who does the right thing.”

“How modest.”

“I’m Jewish,” Maggie said bluntly. “We tend to have our doubts when it comes to Messiahs.”

Ollie looked between the women, staying silent.

Maggie swallowed and asked Daisy, “And you *like* the Doctor?”

“Everyone does. Like you said.”

“But *you* do, maybe a bit more than the rest.”

“Sure I like him, same as you, Mags, same as you.”

She looked guiltily back at Ollie, whose eyes were darting around the palace halls in desperation. Maggie was as much relieved as frustrated when Julie and two tall suited men called Daisy over. She had found nothing out, and the suited men’s mention of ‘a situation’ suggested another mystery that might give Maggie and the Doctor some clue to unravelling all this confusion, if only she could listen in on it. “Aww, ‘scuse me, that’s Neil and Steve. Just got some shop to talk, y’know. It’s no joke running the universe.”

“I bet,” Ollie said wryly. “Sounds like the Doctor has high standards.”

Daisy went on her way and instantly buried herself in the memos, nodding and talking to Julie, Neil, and Steve in a professional manner that entirely belied her earlier dizzy demeanour. Their chatter did not rise above a mumble, but Maggie distinctly heard the words ‘paradox engine’, ‘Camelot’, and ‘the Tower’.

Ollie followed Maggie’s gaze to Daisy. “There’s more to her than meets the eye,” Ollie said. “Not like ... I’m not saying it in a sleazy ...” He trailed off in his characteristic foot-in-mouth dissembling.

“Stop digging the hole Ollie,” Maggie laughed.

He laughed along with her. “Y’know ... it’s so nice to see you again.”

They hugged again. And she couldn’t resist kissing him again and again, more and more passionately. When she held him, he was Ollie. But as with the last time, when Maggie pulled away the reality dawned, and she had so many questions she knew would ruin the unreal perfection of the moment.

“How did it happen, Ollie? What do you remember?”

“I remember that day in Revelstoke, and rushing to the hospital. I remember seeing you, and I remember what you said, right before ...” His voice broke, and Maggie choked up herself. It was worth the unreal wrongness, she was sure it was, to be able to get a chance to see him and talk to him now. She would have given anything that day in November of 1994, in that miserable hospital ward, to get these words with him. And maybe now she could have as many more as she liked. A lifetime of them. And the Doctor would trade all that for a dead Ollie and a ruined Earth of the ‘correct’ timeline. Who was to say, Maggie thought bitterly? Who was to say what was right?

She struggled to dismiss the thoughts, and Ollie had obliviously continued talking. “Then I felt so much pain, but ... then I saw him. The Doctor. He stopped it all. He explained that a long time ago you had been a very good friend to him.” He dipped his nose significantly. “I didn’t make

any assumptions because he was a boy, but when I see your Doctor, it makes a bit more sense ...” After another laugh, he concluded, “And then he set me up here and told me you’d be coming.”

“So you saw the TARDIS? He explained all about Time Lords and time travel and ... timelines?”

“He explained to me about the TARDIS, but he and this other person, they used some kind of bracelet to get here, actually. A Time Ring, they called it.”

“Ooh, that sounds nice.” Maggie looked down at the ring on her finger. Sometimes it pinched, but she was glad she had kept it.

This mention of this other person was more of a clue than anything Daisy had said. The fact that this Doctor wasn’t using his TARDIS was also, she was sure, significant. There was some solution to this.

“He says he doesn’t travel anymore. He wants us to live here with him.” They had stopped at a bay window and Ollie turned to admire the moonless sky and the distant tips of London’s skyscrapers. “We never did make it to London, did we?”

“No. I always wanted to go.”

“Could have. But put it off. There always seemed to be ... more time.”

“It’s an irony. Even travelling through time doesn’t give you any more time. If you know what I mean.” Maggie rested on Ollie’s shoulder, and they held each other and held the moment, wordlessly basking in each other’s embrace.

Julie, Neil, and Steve waited until they had transmatted to the command post in Los Angeles before they discussed the urgent matter with Daisy. Walls were not enough of a barrier against the Doctor, and they had begun to doubt if even an ocean was. But they felt better having it, and continental North America, between them and him.

They swiftly entered a situation room and directed Daisy’s attention to the face on it.

“We’ve lost the Seventh Doctor.”

Neil’s brow furrowed. “Are we sure what number he is?”

“You know who I mean,” snapped Steve, “the one who’s always up to something, that energetic little fellow with the Scots accent.”

“You idiots!” Daisy growled. “Where did he go?”

“That’s just it. We can’t see him anymore, so ...”

Daisy flailed her arm impatiently in their faces. The three executives drew up defiantly. “With respect, Miss Wylar,” Neil said without any respect, “what more should we have done? Our patrols found and located his TARDIS.”

“It’s under guard in the Louvre.” Steve flashed up a picture of the older police box under guard, enthusiastically studied by art critics. They were even ignoring the seven Mona Lisas displayed behind it.

Neil folded his arms. “How could we have imagined he would get away?”

“How did he get away?”

Julie’s long fingers played across the keyboard and the image of the grassland in northeast London appeared. They watched the crafty little man effortlessly sneak into the police box, and watched it fade from view.

“He was bound to steal his future self’s TARDIS,” Julie pointed out.

“Who wants to tell ... our Doctor?” Steve stammered. “The last Doctor?”

“He’s doing his tour,” Julie observed. “Why upset him now?”

“Dishy though he is, why’d you even bring the other Doctor, the eleventh one, into this?” Daisy questioned. “One rogue element was bad enough, but having two of them here ... seems like *that’s* caused all the difficulties.”

“You know why,” Julie replied. “Our Doctor is meaningless while the others exist. His seventh self knows that, and his eleventh incarnation is about to. We have to ensure the project succeeds.”

“And success means that the eleventh incarnation can’t find out until it’s too late,” Neil insisted.

“You don’t have to explain that to me,” Daisy grumbled. “We have to stamp out all this inconsistency.”

“We’re doing it for the harmony of the universe, remember,” Julie assured her.

“What’s the universe ever done for me?” Daisy asked rhetorically.

“For the project!” cried Steve.

“For the project!” they all echoed in unison, swept up by the glory of the moment.

The Doctor didn’t have long.

They had spent several hours whizzing around the Earth this ‘last Doctor’ had remade in his image. As with the rest of the Doctor’s foes, Commander Linx seemed uncharacteristically happy to pilot the open-topped variant on a Sontaran sphere-ship. He supposed it confirmed his suspicions of many of his enemies that they seemed so friendly with this young impostor.

The flying hemisphere allowed the Doctor to better see the landmarks: the boy’s face carved on Mount Rushmore, of course, and the fifty-foot-tall marble TARDIS monument that had been inelegantly added to the Great Wall of China.

“They’re working on another one in Dubai,” the last Doctor informed him. “I would like it to be visible from space.”

“Who have you got working on that? Happy human artisans?”

“Nah,” the boy replied glibly. “I let the humans take it easy and worship me. All that time you wasted on fostering their self-determination and independence ... they like hierarchies, certainties. They like knowing who’s in charge and where their next meal is coming from.”

“Do they indeed?” the Doctor asked haughtily.

“But as for the harsh work ... Sontarans are better labourers anyway, isn’t that right Linx?”

“It is,” Linx replied proudly.

“I don’t remember seeing a lot of infrastructure on Sontar,” the Doctor chided him. “It was all military-related. Even the post office had a meson annihilator on its roof.”

Linx again stuck his tongue out. “That was because our society was foolishly devoted to our interminable war with the Rutans.”

“Never thought of brokering a peace, did you Doc?” the boy asked mockingly.

“It wasn’t that simple.”

“Never know till you try, sunshine. Had to threaten ‘em a bit, of course, but they know who’s boss.” He beat his breast proudly.

Linx bowed with most un-Sontaran acquiescence. “Now that we *have* peace, we can devote ourselves to more worthwhile projects—construction and galactic urban planning. We have very efficiently reorganised the Madillon Cluster.”

They made a few stops to sign autographs and have their pictures taken with fans. The San Diego Comic Con staff were beyond delighted to see them, and the chief convention organiser, Ingrid, was pleased to inform the Doctor that an arrest warrant had been issued for William Shatner.

These interactions with the fans pained the Doctor the most. He wanted to know these people and be their friend, not look down on them from a pedestal. Or did he? Did he wish to be worshipped, somewhere in his being? Was this infant demanding payback for ten thousand years of ingratitude, all the times he had been locked up or kicked around or dismissed by the less intelligent and more authoritative?

They had barely made it through the door of Buckingham Palace when the last Doctor had darted out of the room, thrilled at the sight of hover-limos pulling up at the gate. “The VIPs!” he cried. “No offence, Doctor, lovely though it is you could make it, we’ve got some *real* celebrities for the occasion.”

“I’m no celebrity,” the Doctor insisted.

“Yeah, my point exactly. So I was able to book a few famous faces to shake my hand, sing a song.”

“Who exactly?”

“Shakespeare cancelled on me, and Stephen Fry’s fee was way too high, but I did nab Sir John Hurt, Caroline Munro, Cleopatra, the Terrible Zodin, Ramon Salamander, Neil Patrick Harris ... and I’ve got a charity wrestling match—the Mountain Mauler of Montana against an Ormelian Dexahedron. And there will be music too! We’ll be hearing sets from Athlete, Courtney Pine, Kylie, Muse, Smeg and the Heads, Johnny Chess ... and for the big finale, who else?”

“I give up ... Pachelbel?”

“I transported Keith Moon back from the height of his powers in the early 1970s, so—you guessed it—we’re going to be treated to The Who reunited!”

It didn’t sound like a bad concert, to be fair, and he still had fond memories of catching their Toronto show in 1976 with Maggie just recently¹⁰. But the Doctor would much prefer seeing that, standing in the crowd as a regular punter, than have them dance attendance for him. Evidently, that changed.

And the list seemed incomplete. “Aren’t any of my *real* friends coming? Jo Grant, the Brigadier, Hannah, Vicki? They mean more to me than Ramon flipping Salamander.”

The boy’s features clouded over. “They ... they couldn’t make it. You’ll learn why by the time you regenerate into me.”

The Doctor had a nasty suspicion about the reason, but he let the moment pass.

“Anyway, better change into my black tie. You’re gonna stay in the fishing rig, right?” He looked the Doctor up and down in disapproval. “No judgement, mate, whatever you feel comfortable in. Right then—*allons-y!*”

¹⁰ After *The Doctor Who Project: Fur and the Sky*.

Then he left, and the Doctor was alone, but he didn't have time. But here was a stroke of luck: in the boy's eagerness to depart, he had left his sonic screwdriver on the end table. The Doctor picked up the screwdriver and rapidly scanned the surroundings. If he got some kind of bearings, figured out the extent of the temporal distortion this child had perpetrated, he might begin to figure out what caused it and how to undo it.

The screwdriver buzzed obediently, before it abruptly sparked, singeing the Doctor's hand as it did. Dropping the deactivated tool angrily, the Doctor cursed the lad's ingenuity as he rubbed his raw palm. "Building a failsafe into your sonic screwdriver. No doubt he left it there deliberately, wanted me to use it and fail."

"Perhaps I might be of assistance, Master?" a mechanical voice chirped from across the hall.

The Doctor lit up with joy. "K9!" he cried in delight, falling to his knees to fling his arms around the robot dog.

"Master, embrace inadvisable due to time limitations."

"Quite right, my friend." He gave the dog one last pat on the snout. "If none of my other companions are around, how did you...?"

"I remained on Gallifrey, Master, outside influence of time distortion."

"Jolly good! Now, let's get to work. I need to know when my future self-fouled up the timeline, what's keeping this stasis around the planet ... sixty-eight Fahrenheit in London on a November evening is a dead giveaway ... what the blazes is going on, all in all."

"Affirmative, Master. I will endeavour to provide as much data as possible. Computing." K9's ears whirred and the familiar tickertape dispensed.

The Doctor read the figures, his mind racing in time with his mechanical friend. "Why help me? Isn't that little sprog *your* master as well?"

"He is not. Full data unavailable, but ... he is *not* you, Master."

The Doctor didn't like to admit how much of a relief that was to hear. "But he will be if whatever he's planning comes off, is that it? An alternative future, just like the Valeyard all over again?"

"Affirmative." The seldom-used monitor on K9's side displayed a map of England. "Source of temporal dislocation identified."

"Good grief ... I recognise those figures ... the spatio-temporal coordinates of Camelot?"

"Affirmative, parallel reality, relative time period middle of tenth century."

"One hundred years after my little stint impersonating Merlin. But ... let me guess K9, he's eliminated that particular branch of my future?"

"Correct. Temporal alteration centres on replacement of Doctor-Master's actions with 'little sprog'."

"How I've missed you, old friend. Now then, let's get out of here."

"I couldn't agree more," a familiar Scottish voice said coldly, rolling the 'r'.

The Doctor turned slowly, to see his own, former face—middle-aged, with the expressive madcap breadth of a natural clown offset by the mournful gaze of the ice-blue eyes. He was wearing the familiar plaid trousers and baggy chocolate-brown jacket, and even that pullover the tailor on Sigma Orielir had rattled off. The matching broly, however, had been replaced by a black Winchester rifle, which the short man pointed menacingly forward.

"You ... *me*, I should say."

The previous Doctor, his seventh self, looked at him coldly. "I could hardly let these festivities go forward without joining in, could I?"

"And the rifle you have pointed at my chest?" the Doctor asked his younger self.

"Don't think this is easy for me. After all, now I have to look *myself* in the eye, end my life."

The younger Doctor wrapped his finger around the weapon's trigger.

Chapter Four

Me, Myself, and I

Maggie and Ollie had ended up on the roof of Buckingham Palace. The crowds continued to circulate, and music—now the Cardiff Philharmonic giving their all to a specially composed, almost comically bombastic John Williams-inspired march entitled ‘The Doctor’s Theme’—wafted from the nearby Hyde Park. A fly-past of exotic alien ships lit up the night. If she had the Doctor’s copy of *Jane’s Book of Spacecraft*, Maggie could have regaled Ollie by identifying a *Galaxy*-class Draconian cruiser, a Parraxis void ship, a brilliantly latticed Kroton Warspear, Sabalom Glitz’s tubby little *Nosferatu*, a formation of Gallifreyan Time Scaphes lovingly restored with their original psychosculpture, an E-Space Privateer, the Terran exploration vessel *Boundless*, and the vast Lifeships *Phenomenon* and *Providence*. However, she barely noticed the noise and spectacle of this wayward fleet filling the skies. She was lost in the happiness of having her beloved back with her, in her arms.

It was painful to have this bliss broken by the rude cacophony of the TARDIS engines. Maggie pulled them both out of sight to observe the short, middle-aged man who emerged, knowing despite his unfamiliar face that he was the Doctor as well. Even apart from the similar *recherché* dress sense—in place of the flowing green coat, a baggy brown jacket; no toque, but a straw hat; and in place of the fishing sweater, a sleeveless jumper bizarrely bedecked with decorative question marks—there was an indefinable aura she recognised and gravitated towards. She was about to call to him when she saw the rifle slung over his shoulder.

Yet another sign that something was very wrong about all this.

Wordlessly, she signaled to Ollie to follow the little man.

The couple stayed a few paces back, creating yet more farce as they snuck through the corridors of Buckingham Palace, avoiding being seen by the other Doctor while he avoided being seen by the Black Rod and UNIT soldiers standing guard at every landing and doorway. Then they snuck behind him and stood concealed by the door, mere feet away while he and her Doctor chatted, with a chunky-looking robot dog craning its mechanical head from one to the other in

confusion. Only when his finger wrapped around the gun's trigger did Maggie strike, jumping out of the shadows and onto the smaller and slighter Doctor like a linebacker, knocking him sideways, and causing the shot to fire up into the priceless ceiling.

Ollie relieved the protesting fellow of his weapon, while he indignantly pulled himself free from Maggie's grip. "Well done, the pair of you!" he snapped at them in an agitated Scots burr. "A nice hash you've made of it! Don't you see?" He looked at the Doctor. "Don't *you* see?"

Movement sounded, and the Doctor looked to his predecessor. "Well, I never will unless we make tracks fast."

The other Doctor nodded glumly. "Fair point."

"I assume you arrived here by TARDIS?"

"Yes." The little Doctor flashed a toothy smile. "Yours, as a matter of fact."

"All the better. Lead the way, old chap!"

"Yes, yes, all right," he crabbed impatiently.

The group ran back through the corridor and up the stairs. Soldiers sighted them and ran in pursuit. A wide red blast emitted from K9's nose-laser just in time, and they all collapsed to the ground like a row of skittles.

"Come on K9, with us!"

"Recommend I remain here to repel other aggressors. Do not be afraid, Master. This unit equipped for all defensive possibilities."

"Thanks."

"Your appreciation is recorded."

The Doctor gave the dog one last pat on the head and ran up the stairs.

The rag-tag party ran out onto the palace rooftop, where the TARDIS sat expectantly. The earlier Doctor confidently led the way, his short legs splayed wide to keep up with the other, taller members of the party, his hand clamped on his straw hat. As he approached the police box door, his future self suddenly grabbed his shoulder.

"We haven't time to dawdle about up here, you know!"

Nodding, the Doctor picked up a loose pebble from the roof and flung it at the lamp. A forcefield sizzled bright red. "That would have been enough to knock all four of us out cold."

"Look before you leap, eh?" the earlier Doctor admonished himself, smiling involuntarily despite his sombre mood.

"So I take it—"

"Yes, Doctors. You've been expected." The boy came out from behind the box, now wearing a tuxedo with a red bow tie. The outfit, or possibly the smug grin, put Maggie in mind of Alfred E. Newman. She was increasingly sure there he couldn't be the Doctor. "Great minds think alike."

"Or don't think at all. Shame you didn't remember us not falling for your little trap so you could try something else," the Doctor replied.

"At his age," the seventh Doctor chipped in, "you can't blame him. Memory isn't what it once was."

“Don’t speak too soon, fellas. Maybe I did remember.” At this, two Daleks floated into view, their gun-sticks trained on the two Doctors.

“I suppose you’ve lifted that ‘no extermination’ policy? Try not to be too chipper about it.”

“*Lower your weapon,*” the Dalek commanded the old Doctor.

“Nothing would give me *grrreater* pleasure,” the old man tersely replied, heaving his Winchester over the side of the roof.

“You haven’t rebuilt the sonic screwdriver yet, had I?” the Doctor asked his seventh self.

The earlier Doctor frowned. “What use would a screwdriver be in a situation like this?”

“Why don’t you give up, chaps?” the last Doctor asked. “Cleo’s downstairs and I hate to keep her waiting.”

A thought occurred to the Doctor. “Why wait for us to surrender?”

The boy did not catch the meaning.

“Why not hop down a floor by TARDIS and leave us to the tender ministrations of your Dalek chums? As I’m sure my younger self will attest, she’s well up to the navigation.”

His predecessor’s eyes narrowed, picking up on the point. “Hmm, yes, ... why not?”

The boy seemed to shrink under his two earlier selves’ penetrating gazes. “I ... don’t ... have a key.”

This seemed a flimsy excuse and all three of them knew it. The Doctor decided to call his future self’s bluff. “No problem,” he shot back. “Have mine.” He flung the chain through the forcefield—its energy knit was loose enough that small objects could pass through—and the boy caught it.

The boy held the key in his chubby little hand, his brow furrowed in frustration.

“That’s still not good enough, is it?” the Doctor goaded the boy. “You would never be able to fly the TARDIS.”

“Why don’t you just do what I want?” he bawled, throwing it to the ground. “All right, I can’t use the TARDIS, you know I can’t, you’re just ... making fun of me. I’ll show you! I’ll be a proper Doctor soon enough. You two, shoot them!” he squealed at the Daleks. “Shoot them all!”

The Daleks swiveled their eyestalks to each other in their equivalent of confusion. “*But it would create a paradox—your existence would be imperiled.*”

“I don’t care! Do what you do best—exterminate!”

Their murderous instincts trumping their logic, the Daleks replied, “*We obey. Exterminate!*”

The air rang with the hypersonic shriek of their rays.

Having closed her eyes in fright, Maggie assumed the bright light surrounding them was the Daleks’ ray guns. That made it all the more surprising when the light faded and she heard the familiar hum of the TARDIS console. She opened her eyes to find the two Doctors and Ollie by her side inside the Doctor’s ship, standing up against the railings that ringed the console. Everyone’s arms were raised, expecting the worst, and all lowered with equal relief.

The Doctors wasted no time in leaping to the controls, and within moments the room reverberated with the sound of the ship's mighty temporal engines, and the column was rising and falling reassuringly.

Maggie felt all the worse for Ollie's terrible state. "It's all right," she told him. "I assume we ended up in here due to you two having some clever idea?"

"We had? That's it!" The Doctors raised eyebrows in unison, then snapped their fingers and called out, "HADS!"

"Had what? Is this the start of a joke?"

The shorter Doctor rocked back and forth on the heels of his two-toned shoes. "No, no. H.A.D.S. The Hostile Action Displacement System." He patted his successor's green coat admiringly. "Though you've made a rather ingenious refinement to it, my lad, if I say so myself. Or should I say, *I* have?" Beaming broadly, the older Doctor indicated the blinking display on the console. "The usual defense system relocates the Ship when attacked by an energy weapon."

"But someone inverted it, to leave the TARDIS where it is and relocate the *passengers* out of harm's way." The Doctor bowed to his younger self. "And please, no need to be modest, old fellow. *You* must have modified it and forgot by the time you got to me!"

"Indeed! Or perhaps one of the others did in the centuries between?"

Maggie could sense Ollie's frustration with the mutual appreciation, but she could not help chuckling at it. The Doctors were sweet together—their similarity obvious yet disguised behind their totally different manners. She supposed if she were to suddenly meet her teenaged self, that Maggie might seem as similar—and different—to others.

"How many are there of you?" Ollie asked, cutting through the chatter.

The little Doctor turned to his successor, his eyebrows raised in curiosity. "Yes, what number have I clocked up now?"

"Eleven!" his later self-answered proudly. "Twelve, I suppose, if you count that dreadful boy ..."

"He doesn't count, I tell you. He isn't you, Doctor," Maggie insisted, grabbing his arm. "He *can't* be, I realised it. I knew it from the beginning. I can tell, there's something I recognise in him"—She indicated the diminutive other Doctor—"that I see in you too. I can see, I can feel in my marrow, that you're both the same man. I'm telling you I didn't see it in him, not at all."

"Yeah, hon, because he's ten years old!" Ollie said. "I mean, if you"—he pointed at Maggie's Doctor—"looked like Groundskeeper Willie here when you were *younger* ..."

"Groundskeeper who?" the Seventh Doctor asked indignantly.

"Never mind," the Eleventh Doctor tutted. "We haven't time to get into twentieth century pop culture." Both Doctors demonstrated their kinship by irritably waving away Ollie's confusion and turning to the console. "At least I know where we're headed. K9 has given me coordinates for the epicenter of our boy genius's time distortion."

They shared a determined, conspiratorial smile. It was nice to see them on the same side. For the first time, Maggie was beginning to feel things might turn out all right.

For the fans watching from the ground, the scene took a turn for the bizarre. The sight of the TARDIS had occasioned some speculation, as did the presence of the Daleks and the petulant

orders from the Doctor they knew as their ruler and bringer of peace. They knew from their detailed and reverent reading of the Doctor's lives that different selves tended to treat each other with a little friction, but they had never heard of a Doctor ordering his other selves to be exterminated. And now, the TARDIS had vanished with those other two Doctors, while their Doctor tramped venomously away.

If his bad mood wasn't clear enough, he paused on the edge of the rooftop only to yell down at his admirers: "What are you all looking at?"

The TARDIS reappeared in orbit above Earth. The last Doctor had set up a state-of-the-art defense system more than capable of tracking a Time Lord vessel, and they were ready and waiting. Satellites far in advance of the thirtieth century locked on and weapons were primed and activated. They had been constructed by races for conflict with each other—conflict that the last Doctor's forcible intervention had cancelled out. Attacking the Doctor's own ship seemed a touch perverse, but the order had come from their Doctor himself. Like the Daleks, most of the races involved were only too keen to get the opportunity to fire on something.

The central planetary defenses could be found on the hull of the largest and most legendary space station Earth ever constructed, the mighty Nerva Beacon. The future Ark in Space became the scene of a nightmarish flurry of warfare. Cyber-bombs deployed all around, Beep the Meep commanded an armada of Wrarth Warriors armed with black-star cannons, Dalek hordes powered through the vacuum of space, and Gallifreyan time torpedoes looped back on themselves, detonating in ever-longer seconds *before* they had been launched. No doubt all these combined forces believed a rickety Type 40 model would be no match for their combined hardware.

Yet the TARDIS was nimbler than ever. The Ship seemed to take its own personal delight in tumbling into the Daleks, knocking them out of formation and sending them spinning like skittles out of control into space. Once it had spun giddily past them, the police box skipped like a pebble against Nerva's colossal ringed hull, flattening their firing turrets as it went. Then it bounced away into the blackness beyond. Fleets of spacecraft loomed—from flying saucers and battlecruisers to void ships and supermassive Star Destroyers—but the little box always managed to remain a step ahead (or, through ingenious fractional dematerialisations, a step behind). Within moments it was spinning past Mars and through the moons of Saturn and Jupiter. The icy limits of the solar system-streaked past. Impossible though it was in the vacuum of space, it seemed to gain momentum as it went, whirling even more hectically out into the stars beyond.

If ever proof was needed that the ancient, long-obsolete Type 40 was the greatest ship in all of time and space, this stunning journey provided it. Had its prodigious navigation come courtesy of twice as many pilots? Or perhaps the Ship herself, the Doctor's oldest friend, sensed his desperation, and helped him at the controls when he needed her the most?

Whatever the case, all the assaults outside the craft proved thankfully ineffective, allowing the crew inside to planning their next move.

The Seventh Doctor studied Nerva Beacon, the planets of the solar system, and the assembled fleets and their luminous weapons firing left, right, and centre. His friendly face had once again darkened with worry as he took in the scene.

“All this ... because of me ...” Seeing Maggie, he shook his head and dismissed his introspection. “Just admiring your Doctor’s advancements on my Ship,” he explained to Maggie. “He’s strengthened power to the defensive forcefield. Clever of me.”

The Doctor was straining to reach at another panel, and through his fluster answered, “Yes, I wired in the Master’s temporal comparator to boost the power output ages back. If you don’t mind?”

“*This* switch, I think you’ll find.” Reading his thoughts, the little man scrambled past him, chaotically circling the console before stopping and casually flicking the vital switch in the middle of the panel, which caused them to dematerialise and jump back a critical few seconds that allowed Rutan ioniser-gels to coat a volley of Terrileptil pulse cannons, causing the assault to uselessly crumble in the vacuum.

“Less haste, more spoons,” he misquoted.

“The main problem is this,” the Doctor noted to Maggie and Ollie. “How do we get to Camelot when the brat has the whole planet in a temporal orbit spanning the day of November 23, 2963?”

“It shouldn’t be that hard, should it?” Maggie asked. “This *is* a time machine ...”

“But thanks to this temporal orbit, the space-time collapse means there will very shortly be no other times or places to go *to*.”

“Rather grim,” the seventh Doctor agreed.

As impressively as the TARDIS was coping with this escape, the jump outside the orbit to Arthurian England was proving more challenging. The Doctors ran countless gauntlets past each other and back around the console, furiously disengaged systems and activated dormant functions, and in a moment pure desperation pressed the Fast Return Switch. Though their hated successor did not have a TARDIS of his own, the boy seemed to know and anticipate the functions of this one well enough to prevent them from slipping out of his clutches.

Ollie listened to the pair bicker with a stream of technical jargon and looked back at Maggie. “Do you usually have a lot of input to these conversations?”

Maggie raised her nose proudly. “Yes, as a matter of fact. I got pretty knowledgeable. One time my knowledge of *Joyce Mannix Mysteries* turned out to be critical¹¹.”

“You didn’t meet Juliet Bleek?”

“I did!”

“Oh my God, remember when we started dating? I think I was the only person in the world who was a bigger fan of Joyce Mannix than you were.”

“Were not!”

But Ollie corrected her and reminded her of the miserable weekend in the mid-eighties they spent on Vancouver Island going to her book signing at Munro’s Books. They both laughed at the memory. “I wish you could have met her too, Ollie. I was thinking about you the whole time ... thought about you a lot while I’ve been travelling. I miss Revelstoke like crazy, but it did take the edge away.”

¹¹ See *The Doctor Who Project: Murder, She Lived!*

“Maybe that other kid Doctor wasn’t so bad, eh?”

Maggie said nothing, looking sternly at her husband, and suspicions again popping unwanted into her mind. She fumbled in the pockets of her jeans, that clover twisting around her index finger. “Well, the four-leaf clover did give me one bit of luck...”

“Four-leaf clovers!” the Doctors exclaimed in unison, their eyes wide with delight.

“You guys are just too cute,” Ollie declared wryly.

The tails of the Doctor’s balmacaan fluttered as he raced across to hug her in delight. “Maggie, you genius! Feed that into the console.”

“Two steps ahead, laddie!” The earlier Doctor’s hat flew from his head as he did another slapstick circle of the console, and the scanner image pulled back, showing another world in Earth’s orbit, its orbit identical but mirroring the one they had left.

Two Earths.

“They conjured this world from the time distortion, an artificial mirror image to Earth, and they used their false mirror-world as a hothouse in which to grow their own Doctor.”

“He used his powers to subdue all our enemies and twist the timelines ...”

“But *he* didn’t start it after all, any more than he could use our TARDIS ...” The Doctor broke into a broad grin. “The cheap little fraud.”

Maggie pointed to the mirror Earth. “So that’s the real Earth?”

“It is!” the other Doctor answered before hers could. “And if we journey through space to that planet—doubly easy with that drift control—the temporal fix should be child’s play.”

Maggie’s Doctor folded his arms and watched his counterpart work the controls like an expert pianist, pushing down levers and twisting dials. There was the occasional bump, and the odd shower of sparks from the overworked machinery, but after that the spatial journey went serenely, and then when they were in position, he enthusiastically hammered the dematerialisation switch again.

The party had become stupendous. Music blared so loudly, all of London could likely hear it—perhaps even the whole planet could as well. And it showed no signs of slowing down. It was well past midnight and Cleopatra had suggested a late cruise along the Thames. The Doctor’s barge was crammed with VIPs. Friends of the previous Doctors regarded the boy with some wariness, and so despite the vivacious atmosphere and the close quarters, there was a sense of distance as they navigated the appropriately choppy waters. The Rani was visibly taken with Neil Patrick Harris, and the BBC’s Lizo Mzimba had been buttonholed by the actor who played the Karkus in the memorable mid-21st century holo-broadcasts, recounting a prank on set involving eyepatches.

The Master hated every minute of it, as he had expected. Partying was another irritating custom the Doctor had picked up from humans. But even groups of his fellow Time Lords made the Master uncomfortable—perhaps because he was always plotting how best to eliminate and overthrow them. He had always been like that. Prydon Academy was no place for fun, but he seemed to remember a similar dislocation when the students would socialise outside of class—back when the Doctor really *was* a child.

The archenemies had not spoken all night, but now, as some obliging Ogrons navigated the placid waves, the boy wove past John Hurt and took a seat.

“Evening, wallflower.”

The Master sneered.

“D’you know you were exactly like this at the Academy?”

“How kind of you to point that out, my dear Doctor. I was just remembering that.”

The boy loosened his ugly red bowtie and heaved his undersized torso over the rails of the ship, his large head sagging up and down in time with the waves of black water. The Master might almost have suspected he had been drinking—although it was a curious taboo that, despite his great age, nobody felt comfortable serving ‘Little Time Lord Fauntleroy’ alcohol.

“See, we do have the same mind, don’t we?” the boy asked him.

“More than most Time Lords. We always have.”

“That means I’m just as much the Doctor as either of those fellas.”

“Of course you are,” the Master assured him.

“Still, you’d tell me what I want to hear anyway, if you were bidding your time to hold the universe to ransom again.”

The Master nodded. “I would, but rest assured I don’t have any plans like that on the boil at the moment. Parliament’s kept me too busy.”

“Good to see you being a constructive member of society for a change,” the child observed. There *was* a patronising note the Master remembered from their battles in the 1970s—sometimes he could have passed for the Doctor, it was true. “And I’ve got a girlfriend,” he went on, “which is more than either of them can say. ‘Course, there was all that in the past, wasn’t there? A whole family, once upon a time? It’ll soon be my past. One past, one present, one future. One life, all me, straightforward and without contradictions and complexities. And I deserve it.”

The Master puzzled at this stream of consciousness. “Do you want my ...validation?”

“Can’t believe they got away. Shouldn’t have let ‘em. Not fair. It was a cheat anyway. Anyone can reprogram a shoddy old Type 40 TARDIS. When do I get *my* TARDIS, eh? Look how much I’ve done, Master, and I could do so much more!” He beat his chest as he shouted it. “How many more unimportant people could I save, how much more history can I improve? Better than you. You couldn’t even stop the Magna Carta from being signed, d’you remember that?”

The Master’s lip curled, and through gritted teeth he replied, “Yes. It is so charming of you to bring all these fond memories flooding back.”

“Dunno why I’m beating up on you, Master.” A distracted smile crossed his cherubic lips. “Always sounds funny when I call you ‘Master’, doesn’t it?”

“Sometimes I think I chose the title just to hear you say it.” The Master would never have admitted that to the real Doctor. He felt he was blushing even saying it now.

The boy bent backwards over the railing, as if he wanted to backflip into the water. The Master was momentarily worried, but it was evident it was merely childish balled-up energy, as was the curious see-sawing he did, while looking up at the sky, as he said, “Hope this party hasn’t been too lousy. I invited Queen Galleia, thought you might like a date for the evening.”

The Master narrowed his eyes. “She only had eyes for my earlier incarnation.”

The last Doctor eyed Daisy, looking seductive but distracted at the other end of the barge, suspiciously. “Yeah, I’m feeling a bit of that. When they show up—those other ‘me’ I mean—it takes something away from a bloke, doesn’t it?”

"I imagine so," the Master agreed. "I haven't been so fortunate to cross paths with myself yet." Knowing his homicidal hatred, he wondered if such an encounter wouldn't end in each Master trying to kill the other.

"Well, take it from me, chum, it's no picnic. A man is the sum of his memories and all that." He smiled. "It's been good, this. You and me, friends again."

The Master smiled—not a sneer, but the briefest and most genuine glimmer of happiness. When had he felt that last? The smile made his face feel odd. "Indeed it has. I think the last time we spoke so affectionately was ... all the way back on Castrovalva? There are times, my dear Doctor, when I wish we had never ..."

"Me too, mate, me too." The barge was coming in at the Victoria Embankment. The boy's eyes narrowed into a sneer so naturally evil, the Master immediately envied it. "You know where the Doctors went, don't you? Is it anything to do with that Tower on the other Earth? The one I'm not supposed to know anything about?"

The Master didn't answer, but their shared Time Lord thought processes told the last Doctor at once that he was right.

"The purpose behind all this ... the project ... it's frustrating not being in on it." The boy smiled even more conspiratorially. "You know Master, the night is young. I may not have a police box of my own to fly, but d'you suppose we might take a little trip in *your* TARDIS? Track those two party-poopers down?"

It was hardly that simple, and the Master was on the verge of explaining it. Thanks to the strain this new reality had placed on the time-space continuum, such a journey could even be their last.

But then, a wave of pure anarchy coursed through the evil Time Lord's veins. His silky chuckle echoed through the night. "Why not, my dear Doctor? What are friends for? It would be my pleasure."

"You really are my *best* enemy, aren't you?" The boy called over to Daisy. "Oi! Get your coat!"

Chapter Five

Fairest Isle

In the interstellar temporal academe, there are few more rarefied subjects of study than Comparative Xeno-Mythology. One professor in the field who flourished in the twenty-sixth century held a dim view of reading too much into the overlaps between different cultures and the stories they tell themselves. It was, she argued, too easy to misinterpret or over-interpret this or that creation myth or devil figure, especially with highly advanced aliens and godlike time travellers muddying so many planets' historical waters. A scholar was all too liable to grab entirely the wrong end of the stick. And then successive academics would grab on to the same stick and perpetuate the same falsehoods—and you ended bogus theories like aliens with crystal skulls building Mayan temples, when Mayans were perfectly capable of building them on their own, thank you very much.

However, even this storied professor might have been taken aback at some similarities between the legends of Arthur, King of the Britons, and Rassilon, founder of the Time Lords. Superficially, Arthur and Rassilon shared only their formidable beards and the possibility that both might have met the Doctor. But the myths surrounding both figures revealed deeper connections. The fallen king borne to Avalon, to return to the throne at the hour of his country's greatest need, had an irresistible parallel with the legendary Time Lord founder lying in state, his everlasting mind living on in Gallifrey's Dark Tower.

It was an autumn morning in Camelot when the tranquil English glade was sharply invaded by the furore of the TARDIS grinding into solidity. The seemingly everlasting summer of Arthur's reign had ended, and this day was forebodingly chilly. An even bitterer winter seemed on the horizon. But at least now there was some faded remnant of those happy days of the past. The police box—to some as symbolic and meaningful as Excalibur—settled into the field, while within, its inhabitants took their time stepping out into the fray. The Doctor had an uneasy feeling that whatever happened next would involve a goodbye. And he was reminded of that childhood resolution that he hated all goodbyes.

The TARDIS exuded a palpable aura of exhaustion. Its internal lights had dimmed, and its omnipresent hum had a nasty rattle behind it—like a hacking cough for the semi-sentient machine. Nevertheless, the Doctor assured Maggie and Ollie they were in no danger, and that everyone might like to catch their breath before setting foot outside. He suggested to his companion that her husband might enjoy seeing some of the rest of the Ship.

They had done a few laps in the swimming pool together, and Maggie felt invigorated. While he changed, she brought a fruit plate into the control room. She entered, towelling off her unruly hair, to find the earlier Doctor slumped in her Doctor's favourite easy chair, his coat and shoes off, and his Paisley-patterned tie loosened, and his eyes closed, breathing in and out shallowly.

"It is a very comfortable chair," her familiar Doctor observed. "Oh, very considerate Maggie. I always do love a nice, fresh pineapple." He looked over at the recumbent, wavy-haired Scotsman, a contented snore escaping from his lips. "As do I."

"It's confusing enough meeting yourself when you look the same all your life, never mind being a much older, younger man."

"We Time Lords never consider the strangeness. Another reason I enjoy seeing life through your eyes."

She handed him some pineapple and took a wedge herself. For a few seconds they chewed in silence, the Doctor grabbing some juice from the pitcher to wash down the tropical fruit. He was heartened that Maggie had even adorned the glasses with the bendy straws that Tegan liked so much. Even more marvellously, he picked up two brick-shaped bars wrapped with foil. "Did you get these from the food machine?"

She nodded. "I thought that stopped working, but it just spat them out as I walked by."

"Probably sorted its kinks out for our younger guest of honour. Although it had packed up long before him too, I think ..." The Doctor took a bite. "Ah, still just as delicious though. Bacon and egg, just like I remember."

"Dimensionally transcendental food?" Maggie asked wryly, declining the Doctor's offer of a bite.

"Will your husband be joining us?"

"He takes forever in the shower ... *took*. Funny. Whatever tense you'd call this, it isn't the present, is it?"

The Doctor looked sideways. "You know Maggie, I don't want you to think I couldn't have brought your husband back purely because of some arcane Time Lord rules. Changing history remains morally wrong and structurally dangerous. The consequences are ..."

"Doctor, you don't need to tell me. I understand. That's what makes it all so hard. I'm trying not to think about those consequences, and what will inevitably happen, and just enjoy it as it's happening. I can't deny I love having him back, and will relive every painful second of this after it's over. But I have to forget the future tense. Live in the moment."

"Hard even for a time traveller."

"I'm sure you've been faced with this decision, had to lose people you cared about."

“More often than I care to admit. Maybe in some twisted way, that’s for the best. I feel the ... well, this version of me you’re so certain *can’t* be me, that little upstart in 2963 ... it’s a compelling reason you may be right, and he may *not* be the, uh, real McCoy, so to speak.”

“I know I’m right about it,” she maintained.

“In all my lives, no matter how fervently I’ve wished, I’ve never changed events or resurrected people as a parlour trick. Life has to be worth more than that. A life saved can balance out another taken. We see the sad side when we think of those we lose, but there is the better side as well.”

“I know, Doctor.”

“What about Ollie?”

Maggie looked away. “He’s exactly like he was. He was a good man.”

“You’d never marry a bad one, I’m sure.”

“I ... I just don’t know, Doctor. Of course, he’s understandably a little more on the fence about the kid.”

“Can’t blame him for that I suppose.”

They shared a laugh, then another when Ollie entered the control room with a towel around his shoulders and that inescapable sixth sense that goes with one’s ears burning.

Maggie did wonder whether she could trust Ollie fully—despite loving him fully. The Doctor understood his divided loyalties, but the fact remained that there could be some critical moment where they all depended on Ollie, and in the final analysis those loyalties might prevent him doing the right thing. What could she do? Blindly trust him without considering his perfectly reasonable motives to act against them? Or equally irrationally distrust him despite the depth of her love and delight to see him again?

Her morbid train of thought was broken by the seventh Doctor, waking with a start because Ollie’s towel idly brushed his face as he passed. He was quickly indulging in the other bar of TARDIS food. “Hmm! Bacon and egg! My favourite!”

The Doctors, Maggie, and Ollie stepped out into the brisk day. Maggie felt self-conscious putting on her unflattering parka, but the biting cold made her glad. Even the Doctor was donning his familiar maroon watch cap. His other self, meanwhile, had found an umbrella with a cherry-red handle in the shape of a question mark and was swinging it around with evident delight. “I feel like myself again. Much nicer than a gun,” he muttered approvingly.

Ollie did not seem to notice the suddenly frigid air, his awe torn between the mythical surroundings in which they had landed, and the police box that had brought them here.

“So it really *is* ...” He peered through its opaque pebbled-glass windows. “Smaller on the outside.”

“Hence the acronym, ‘Time And Relative Dimensions In Space’. More impressive to see it the other way around.”

“Don’t be so modest Doctor, it’s still damned impressive. My wife is one lucky lady.”

Maggie and her Doctor exchanged a smile, but the younger incarnation—never one for sentimentality—had already dashed ahead to explore.

“So, are we really going to see King Arthur? Did he actually look like Richard Harris then?”

“My money’s on Graham Chapman,” Maggie countered.

The Doctor shook his head wryly. “He won’t be around to settle that, I’m afraid. This is about a century after Arthur’s death. He’s in a parallel universe, at the bottom of Lake Vortigern. As for meeting him ... I’m not sure if I have, yet. I may have found myself back here once a couple of regenerations ago. It’s all a bit fuzzy, no doubt due to crossing universes and being entombed in ice caves by Morgaine and so on ...”

“Ah, ah, ah!” his previous incarnation admonished from the other side of the glade, prodding the air with the tip of his broly. “Don’t spoil things, eh?”

The Doctor shook his head and ran after himself.

Maggie and Ollie looked at each other and decided to follow more slowly, as they couldn’t imagine either Doctor would enjoy hearing them sing some highlights from Lerner and Loewe.

The Doctor gained on his younger self easily, and gave him a start as he grabbed his shoulder and said, “Penny for your thoughts, old man?”

“Gah!” the earlier Doctor exclaimed. “This is no time for fooling.” He dropped his irritable mask and said, “In truth I was thinking about when everything changed. When I first encountered this glimpse of my future.”

“When was it? Since I have no memory of it, perhaps pinpointing the divergence in our timelines might give us some clue.”

“Indeed. It wasn’t a time I’d soon forget anyway. It was quite a while after I left Perivale with Ace.”

“Ah. Ace. A good friend. One of the best.”

They both fell silent for a second in sorrow. “Ace, yes, yes. I was inside the Ship, but we never landed again. The TARDIS was attacked! Invaded!”

“That might explain the uncertainty in my memories. My word, no Silver, no Tom and Val, no Hannah ...”

“Exactly. And I got a glimpse of my future selves, dying before their times.”

The Doctor recalled those new memories of his three earlier deaths, in that eerily deserted manor house, in deep space, and in San Francisco. “I saw that too.”

“And I saw that boy there, doing it. Doing all this ... just to spite me. I was filled with guilt ... shame ... rage. I could take the damage to my future, but to lose Ace ... the friend I counted on most in the whole universe. I had so many plans for her, and now I’d never get to see them through. Even I can’t play a game of chess with an opponent who’s making moves from the future.”

The Doctor remembered that devious nature of his former self. He hoped it had dissipated over time, but perhaps some of his actions in the lives since proved it had merely changed form along with his face.

“From then on I became desperate. I even thought of going home, but somehow I knew they’d throw me to the wolves, and they were possible mixed up in it themselves. So instead I thought of that boy and how to stop him. I hunted through space and time, tried to learn what I could about him. But every journey grew harder. It wasn’t the TARDIS. The universe started contracting. Wherever I attempted to land, I could only end up in the thirtieth century, then 2963.

Then it shrank further, becoming only November 2963, and then it shrivelled right down to the twenty-third of November. I realised whatever is unravelling my future and your past, was spreading through all time. And I learned the truth about him, believed *him* to be my future, and, well, faced with that I was convinced my destiny had to change ...” He looked across at his future self, ashen-faced. “You must believe I am desperately sorry I tried to kill you, but you see, it seemed the only way to prevent this horror from coming to pass. Cancel out my future to save the universe.”

“I would have done the same thing ... I wonder if that’s what they wanted ...”

“Who?”

“Whoever’s pulling the strings of our little Id?”

The seventh Doctor stroked his chin, considering this. “Mm, indeed, there’s a thought.”

“In any case, I’m lucky we’re such a lousy shot.”

That mischievous smile flashed across his face. “Heh! Yes, I quite agree.”

Their shared laughter was interrupted by Ollie, breaking the crisp air with a scream.

The figure who watched them lay deep in the woods, the fading greenery allowing his own green robes to blend in perfectly. He saw the blue box arrive, and dared to hope that those within might bring the salvation they needed right now.

The Doctors shared some relief to come out of the forest and find a somewhat embarrassed Ollie trembling in the shadow of a suit of armour. Prodding at the helmet with his brolly, the Doctor burst into laughter when shoots of hay tumbled to the grass as well.

“Oh, cut that out,” Maggie said. “What the hell is it anyway? Some Arthurian scarecrow?”

“Yes, yes, I’d imagine something of the sort. Folklore can be a funny thing. By its definition irrational. That’s what makes it so fascinating, don’t you think?”

Her Doctor examined the lifeless heap of metal warily. “You weren’t wrong to be startled. Look at its posture.” It had been propped on its knees, appearing to lean against the hilt of its massive sabre as if in solemn prayer. “Very lifelike. As if it had been moving around and stood still when we came along.”

His earlier self cocked his eyebrows. “Well, at least this one’s hit the hay,” he said archly.

The others groaned at the gag as they went back to their route, the earlier Doctor pointing the way to a majestic silver spray of waterfall, turning to ice in the rapidly dropping temperature. The later Doctor gave one last look at the knightly scarecrow as he went on his way. He looked to the lowering skies, that feeling of surveillance recurring even in the evidently empty woods.

Only when he had gone did the gauntleted arms jerk to life, grabbing its discarded head and replacing it atop the shiny steel suit. With the same spasmodic gait, it got to its feet, replaced its sabre back inside the scabbard, and lurched after them.

It was later in the day when the serenity of the glade was broken by the higher-pitched materialisation sound of the Master's TARDIS appearing. It took the form of a mighty oak, a fact the last Doctor noted with admiration when he stepped outside.

"Impressive. When I'm the one true Doctor, I'll fix my chameleon circuit, that's for sure!" He looked over at his familiar police box scornfully.

"I dunno," Daisy said, crossing to the police box and dragging her shellacs along its wooden post. "Looks nice, dunnit? Distinctive-like?"

The boy snorted and looked back at his enemy's ship. "Master?" he called into the tree. He rapped on the oak. "Master, me old china? Are you coming out?"

"No my dear Doctor!" the voice called from within. "Instead I will abandon you here to your doom, with no way of escape! Farewell forever!" His malevolent cackling blended seamlessly with his TARDIS engines sounding; moments later, though, they slowed and halted, replaced by a more desperate whirring sound.

The Master emerged from a gap in the wood, hurriedly pushing past them and diving into the brush. The boy and his bride shrugged and followed. From their position, all three looked on in horror as the TARDIS folded in on itself, the tree turning crude and flat, and then seeming to swallow up into the shimmering blue vortex that lay beyond time.

He avoided their gaze as he brushed damp twigs from his black leather tunic.

"Luckily I'm not the type to take offence," the boy declared pompously.

They said no more about it, knowing what it meant. The Master was no more in control of his destiny than the boy was of his. Their mutual controllers, the ones who had engineered this Doctor and his entire twisted timeline, had built in a trap to permanently conceal this location. While they were in charge here, any attempt to escape in the Doctor's TARDIS would trigger the same result. Their only consolation was that the Doctors—unless they thought of something extremely clever—were in the same boat.

Or, as the Master tersely put it, remembering the Cockney prison argot with which he had once taunted Jo Grant: "Looks as though we're all here for the rest of our naturals."

This did not feel like any historical period or alien planet Maggie had ever visited. It felt haunted, yes, but also magical. Even the sunset gleamed with ethereal light, threads of gold twinkling against the silvery glisten the clouds and the waters had.

They passed a vast lake, whose other side was wreathed in mist. The faint outline of silver-skinned maidens could be seen swimming in its cerulean depths, and a chime-like musical melody wafted along the water as they went.

From down here, the trail led uphill, and before they knew it they were at the foot of the waterfall, whose rush was slowed by the cold and turning to ice. Along the way, a beast's gargantuan rib jutted from a scorched patch of earth. In the distance they spied a dragon in the sky, flapping its leathery wings balefully as if passed.

"There never were dragons, for real," Ollie bravely maintained, desperate to ignore the evidence of his own eyes.

“Not in your dimension, no. But this has always been a place and time where dimensions converged, where impossible realms exist side by side ...” the Doctor pondered. “That’s why my presence here has always worried me. I always feel I might be out of my depth.”

“And also why we can never remember it properly as well, I’ll be bound,” the earlier Doctor added.

Maggie touched his green coat sleeve. “A depressing thought?”

“Oh no ... in fact, it’s almost the opposite. When you get to my age, it’s nice to remember Alice is right. There *are* still some impossible things out there.”

The light was fading, and the verdant pasture was dimming to a sepulchral grey. A gloomy ashen hillside was visible beyond the waterfall, where a once-magnificent castle could be seen, its turrets and spires still carrying some grand Gothic majesty. Massive bas-reliefs of knights had been chiseled from the stone. “Tintagel,” the seventh Doctor identified.

But the Doctors were not, apparently, headed there. They stopped and noted with awe at the rushing waters turning to ice as they looked on.

“Merlin!” a musical voice, with a hint of a Welsh accent, sounded behind. The voice repeated its cry, louder, with amazing resonance against the rushing waters.

“I think it’s for you,” Maggie said wryly.

“Oh, not this routine again,” the little Doctor grumbled.

They all turned to see a figure stumble forth from the woods. He wore a girdle—there was no other word for it—made of mottled green leather alternating with strips of chainmail. Maggie saw amid its jarring mixture of materials some high-tech panels—and, her blood went cold to notice, the unmistakable emerald green of a strip of the Doctor’s balmacaan.

“It’s a knight—a *real* one this time!” Ollie exclaimed with delight.

“A good sign,” she said. It *was*, of course—for the knight to wear a strip of the Doctor’s coat suggested that he definitely survived to give it to him. But the dried blood on the garment weighed against that happy certainty. Still, the guy was a knight—it had to be someone else’s, didn’t it? Come to think of it, did she even know what colour the Doctor’s blood was?

The lanky figure approached, and the Doctors greeted him with the self-consciousness of a time traveller not knowing when they would or would not meet a future friend. “You will need a knight to enter the tomb, no less than a Knight of the Round Table! And I have waited for you.” He sank to his knees, resting on the hilt of his sword in that same pose as the scarecrow-like mock-up they had seen farther back.

“Oh get up,” the Doctor insisted. “If there’s one thing I’ve really had enough of it’s all this bowing and scraping around me. I’m nobody special, you know. Good to see you again, Gawain.”

The knight obeyed and clapped his gauntlet to each Doctor’s forearm in turn. “Two wizards? Can you both be aspects of our fallen mage Merlin? Aye, I recognise it in your shared aspects.”

Once again, Maggie’s recognition of the Doctors despite their different faces was vindicated.

“The day of reckoning must be upon us,” Gawain continued. “And you have a maiden and her minstrel to accompany you?”

“That’s right,” the Doctor replied. “Lady Margaret and Lord Oliver.”

He was almost skeletal in his old age. He dipped his head self-consciously to the others. "Sir Gawain. As you can see, Merlin, the years have not been as kind to I as they have to you, but I still wear the green girdle I claimed."

The Doctor examined it. "With a few optional extras added, I see. Who knew my future self was such a dab hand with a knitting needle?"

"Hasn't it been a century?" Maggie asked.

"Aye, my lady. Merlin may have fallen in battle against Morgaine, but we faithfully followed his magic. He kindly provided me a reviving draught, which has kept me strong in the wake of this oppression. I knew you would return one day and on that day, would need me by your side. The King lies still in state in that far-off dimension of Avallion?"

"Yes," the Doctor replied cautiously. "That's where Maggie and Ollie call home. Today's battle is a different one."

"I know, sire. You spake of this dark day to prepare us." Gawain massaged his temples, struggling to remember long-ago conversations. "Fair Camelot's barriers have been closed by challengers to your kinsmen, those Lords of Time. I alone have been left here. My fellow knights lie on the other side of Avallion."

"Closing the crossroads in time?" the seventh Doctor thundered. "The Time Lords did that? Of all the dangerous, irresponsible ..."

"Aye. And not content with that action, they have blasted the land and laid waste to days past and yet to come."

The Doctor nodded. "We've seen the results of it, Gawain. Time and space dangerously contracting. Did you say the Time Lords are behind this?"

"Nay, brave Merlin, they are no ordinary Lords of Time. Something new and more powerful still. Ware them, sires, we must have our wits about us at all times!"

An old lady's voice added, "And Gawain, you've been blathering on so long you've lost yours!"

The group turned around in more amazement. An Arthurian crone in faded vestments shuffled through the wood, her long-nailed hands fluttering as she illustrated the surroundings.

"Lady Nimue, good sorceress, forgive me," Gawain reproached.

"Never mind that," Nimue pointed out, "look around!"

In the time they had been talking, there was the faintest rustling in the darkening woodland. Only now, when Nimue paused for effect, did its source become clear. That scarecrow in armour stood at the pass, and several like it stood in formation at the path back to the woods.

The seventh Doctor, who had stayed silent throughout this exchange, gave another of his broad smiles, the circumstances turning it sinister. "Well, I do hope no one was thinking of turning back?" He held his broolly erect, swinging it around like a sword as if to ward off the ghoulish legion of knights.

"Keep your eyes on them," the Doctor commanded.

They backed into a solid rock wall. The Doctors, having led the way, now stood at the back. For a moment they flattened against it. Then its seemingly unyielding surface flickered around them and they vanished within.

Maggie and Ollie jumped backwards too. Nimue belied her infirmity by sprinting through the illusory wall with agility.

Finally, Gawain turning for a moment to ensure the others had made it, did his best to ignore the ache running up his shin and took the jump himself, the scarecrow moving so fast he ended up with some strands of hay in his leather belt when he checked it on the other side.

On the other side of the rock wall, the sound of rushing water was still audible. Even more alarmingly, there was no light. The space was merely cold, damp, and incredibly vast. Maggie felt they stood in a single pipe of the world's most massive organ.

The seventh Doctor produced a torch and cast it either way. Brief glimpses allowed them all to assemble a picture of the chamber in their minds—a massive cavern with one wall of solid ice.

“If I remember that escapade with Morgaine and the Brigadier, I suppose another one of us is entombed somewhere down there? Or will be, at any rate. What a day for chance encounters!” He sounded inappropriately jolly as he rattled through these details, and Maggie admired his continually upbeat attitude even though it confirmed he was considerably ... ‘zanier’, to put it politely, than her Doctor; downright mad at the moment.

Nimue did not share his amusement. “That was the work of the Dark Witch Morgaine, Merlin—” but her further protests were silenced by both Doctors’ inarticulate tutting.

Maggie touched the ice, but the Doctors were frustratingly uninterested in their future death. Instead one followed the other the opposite way, down a narrow low tunnel ...

“Do you hear that?” she asked.

“Aye, infernal machinery,” Sir Gawain replied.

“Whoever has made all this,” the Doctor said, “they’ve made it into quite the little home away from home.”

Gawain strode to the front of their formation. “Wise old Merlin, we shall face our foes side by side. This I swore upon Excalibur itself.”

“Mm, that’s very good of you, Gawain.” The little man seemed suddenly slumped and weary, and Maggie realised how much he needed their friendship and support.

They ventured through the narrow passage, with only the sliver of silvery light from the little Doctor’s torch to hold onto. It was a tense and silent journey, Maggie’s apprehension at what lay on the other side overwhelming her relief that she still had two men she loved by her side through this incomprehensible ordeal. Ollie, deep in her heart, she expected to lose. But as their trials had gone on and the scale of the enemies they were pitted against became clear, she was increasingly and terrifyingly facing the prospect that the Doctor would not make it out alive either. That strip of his coat on Gawain’s girdle was a flimsy shred of hope to hang on to. She knew the situation—he would easily lay down his life to prevent that gaudy childish impostor from usurping it. Next to losing them, any thought she had of her own life and mortality was distant, at best her fourth-biggest worry.

Right now she turned to her third-biggest worry: what horrors they would face at the end of this tunnel; what truth they would uncover; and the inevitable prospect of the Doctor—both of him—making a desperate stand against the threat.

It was fair to say the scene at the end of the tunnel was (a competitive category, this) Maggie’s greatest surprise of the day. It was surprising in its very drabness.

They stood in a large room with one circular wall and a desk. It was a waiting room. A woman in a high collar of some stiff alloy sat, smiling with a paradoxically benign menace.

The younger Doctor turned off his pen-torch and raised an eyebrow. Gawain sheathed his sword. The Doctors stepped to the desk. The seventh Doctor rapped on it with the question-mark handle of his umbrella.

“Good evening, my name is Bonnie. How may I help you?”

“Well ...” They looked at each other, scratching at their necks and tugging at their different collars to make their embarrassment plain. “We’d, er, like to see who’s in charge.”

“Oh, Doctor,” Maggie declared with a half-smile. “Don’t you mean, ‘Take us to your leader’?”

The little fellow flashed her another toothy grin in appreciation. “Well, I suppose one more cliché won’t kill us this late in the game.”

“May I ask your name?” Bonnie asked.

“The Doctor!” they cried in unison.

Bonnie looked down at her dusty appointment ledger, dismayed. “You weren’t expected. Doctor who?”

Chapter Six

The Inheritors of Time

The Master and the last Doctor had unexpectedly pulled up the rear on their own course to the ice caves in the shadow of Tintagel. Daisy led the way, the chilly night air infusing her with a purpose neither man had seen before.

The scarecrow knights popped out from all sides, causing the archenemies to jump out of their skin each time. The last Doctor held his sonic screwdriver forward and waved it around him frantically, as if it were a magic wand to ward off the animated goons. This was useless, and indeed only seemed to make their pursuers angrier. The Master's own tissue compression eliminator did little more. He activated it again and again, but somehow their straw and armour were impervious to its lethal shrinking ray.

The scarecrows did not even lunge for Daisy. After their initial confusion, the boy and the Master did not question this, merely exploiting this advantage by putting away their ineffective talismans and sticking close by her.

Fearsome forks of lightning were striking left and right by the time they reached the near-Arctic waterfall. It illuminated the distant carved knights in the side of Tintagel, their stone faces seeming to change expression with each brilliant flash.

The Master didn't like to admit how scared he was, as he followed the boy and Daisy through the waterfall and into the cold dark tunnel. Even worse, the Master wouldn't dare admit how relieved he was to hear his *real* archenemy's voice echoing from the tunnel's other end.

The Doctors, Maggie, Ollie, Sir Gawain, and Nimue followed Bonnie into a vault-like space. It was a throne room mixed with a mausoleum, its walls carved with bas-relief statues and heroic

tableaux, and in its centre, three massive oblong boxes hewn of stone. They were like the megaliths of Stonehenge put on their side.

"Nowhere to sit," Maggie remarked. "Our reception is getting distinctly cooler."

"You could always pop your clogs up here," the Doctor suggested, with his trademark irreverence, he did just that, swinging the green folds of his coat over the edge of the box. His younger self, like a teenager imitating an adult, did the same on the next one over.

Nimue shook her head. "Merlin, your impudence knows no bounds."

He patted the stone ledge next to him. "Come on Maggie, up you come."

She shook her head. "Call me old-fashioned, but I agree with Nimue. Sitting on someone's coffin gives me the creeps."

"Oh, this is no coffin, Maggie. The three inside here are no more dead than Merlin is out front—well, at least if I'm still here."

Maggie looked through a frosted partition at the top of the stone. She saw a young and handsome face framed with long hair and a neat beard.

"Suspended animation?" guessed Ollie.

"You must come from Merlin's land too, brave Oliver," Gawain marvelled.

"Revelstoke, actually."

Gawain nodded approvingly. "'Tis a noble-sounding domain."

The Doctor helped his other self-off the coffin so they could examine it in more detail. "The technology looks adapted from our people ..."

"Hmm, but considerably reconfigured," his other self-finished. "Stolen, do I think?"

"I do ..."

Ollie screwed up his courage and looked over the edge. His eyes widened when and he looked to the others. He saw a young, pleasant-faced man with a beard in one; in the next, a thin, suavely handsome face in his mid-50s like a 1930s movie star—complete with glossy black hair and a pencil moustache on his upper lip. In the next booth, he saw a younger man with flowing hair and somewhat Gallic features.

Maggie answered his unspoken question. "Other Doctors. Number eight, nine, and ten."

"More Doctors? I'd say it's pretty vain to have so many facelifts."

"The three that the boy killed?" she asked her Doctor. He nodded solemnly. "So there is hope for them."

"As long as I'm here and Merlin's out there somewhere, then there is. But as you and I know all too well, Mags, time can be rewritten. And right now it's feeling shaky."

The seventh Doctor nodded. "Very vulnerable. I can feel my hair curling at the prospect."

"What about the boy wonder?" Maggie asked. "I notice there's no coffin for him."

"I don't think he's ever been here. This must be all set up and running for his benefit, without his knowledge." The Doctor nodded toward another vestibule. "It's time we settled this. I don't want to end up regenerating into him because I stuck around waiting."

"Indeed, laddie," the younger Doctor agreed. "And I think that's exactly what this gambit is designed to trigger. So, er, if you will permit me, what I suggest is that we stick together—that way we'll each watch the other's back to ensure *neither* of us ... regenerate in that way. If the end goal is to rewrite our history, it's a reasonable assumption. It's our best way of keeping a move ahead of the other players in this game."

Before they left, Nimue pulled the Doctor aside and talked in a low tone. Maggie wished she could hear their words, but all she was able to see was the old crone passing the Doctor a glass vial—filled with what looked like sand. She didn't fancy it would do much to defend him, but she only hoped she was missing something.

The Doctor nodded his thanks to Nimue and turned to Sir Gawain. "You all stay in here. Nimue, Gawain, look after Maggie and Ollie. Maggie and Ollie, you watch their backs as well. If anyone wakes up, you may have to give them an old Camelot welcome."

Gawain fondled the hilt of his sword. "With pleasure, my lord."

The chamber led off into a colder, lower tunnel, which came out in a more modern space. Expanses of rock and ice stretched into the darkness, which gave the impression of infinite depths both above and below. These blue-lit natural eruptions fed into a bizarre control panel. Its controls had the look of malleable stone, and its viewing screens had a burnished, crystalline look, their grainy images trickling down their surface like a thin stream. It was a strange medieval translation of high technology.

The Doctors marvelled at these strange rippling interfaces, clearly akin to the interdimensional technology used by the Pleasure Dancers¹². The focal point of this stone-hewn panel, and the only source of illumination in the room, was a glowing cube of brilliant light.

"So that's how they've sealed off the crossroads and effected such massive temporal change," the Doctor realised. "They're using the Key to Time."

They paused a second to take in its awesome power, both feeling the continuum itself course and flux through the object's perfect crystal. The Doctor had only felt its power for the briefest of moments before he scattered its segments back across time and space. It was fascinating and horrifying to see and feel it again, in the hands of their enemies.

His earlier incarnation laughed nervously, his fingers playing over his lips. "Oh, that old bauble again," he remarked caustically. "Not those tedious Guardians of Light and Darkness? Do you think they're about? Could *they* be behind this, then?"

"No, I reckon this is just more pilfered technology."

"Shame for us that every bozo who wants to run the universe seems to organise a massive swap-meet."

Both Doctors' attention wandered to the screen, and the familiar face on it.

"Have you any idea what it's like to be wanderers in the fourth dimension?" a recorded voice crackled on the black and white image. "To be exiles? Susan and I are cut off from our own people, without friends or protection. But one day, we shall go back. Yes, one day ..."

"And that's where it all went wrong," a stern voice behind them concluded.

Both Doctors whipped around on the spot, surprised at whom they were facing. It was Julie, the last Doctor's personal assistant. Behind her, Neil and Steve stepped into line.

"Could you ever have conceived then, the consequences of your life?" Julie asked them. She pointed at the short man. "Six regenerations later, look how you've changed." Then her finger twitched toward his later self. "And then the increasing weight of the lifetimes as your eighth,

¹² See *The Doctor Who Project: Dead Gods' Carnival*.

then ninth, then tenth, then eleventh selves are added to the line?" She pointed back at the screen. "Back in those days, all you wanted to do was to see the universe, and it all led to this, the universe revolving around you."

The Doctor laughed. "That boy isn't me, though, is it? It's a temporal Frankenstein's Monster, feeding back on my past and changing history, and closing off all possible alternative timelines, courtesy of you three and the Key to Time?"

"Our project can only succeed if the last Doctor becomes the only Doctor," Neil said blandly. "We've taken it upon ourselves to ensure that he will."

"But why, young man, why? To put it bluntly, what did I ever do to you?" The seventh Doctor bit his upper lip and marched toward them, humming threateningly as he neared. An aura of righteous anger combined with his usual antic energy and imbued his diminutive form with a buzz of menace, and the trio stepped onto the back foot as he neared them. "If we're being frank with each other, you have me at a disadvantage. I don't even know who you are. You *aren't* my people, nor the Guardians, the Eternals, Pleasure Dancers, Gods of Rrragnarok ... though I see you are able to adapt and distort their technology and spy in on my private conversations from long ago. But I'm still no nearer to the answer, and it's most vexing to a time traveller who values his freedom, and his privacy."

Julie drew herself erect, her human features rippling into a blanker cast and her skin now glowing as the energy within burst from the confines of her human disguise. "We are the Preservers. We aim to unify time and space into one consistent timeline. By reconfiguring your part in temporal affairs and bringing order to it, we will be able to begin a new era of harmony."

"Harmony!" they cried in unison. "The project!"

The younger Doctor's blue eyes narrowed witheringly at her. "All very admirable, I'm sure. But why does it have to revolve around me?"

"Because, Doctor," she replied, "we identify *you* as the most vital problem with universal stability."

"I'd take issue with that."

"The Time Lords tried to control you, limit your interference in universal affairs, direct it to their purpose."

"But," Steve added, "that stems from a false notion that you can contribute to maintaining that balance rather than, as we have reason to believe, posing a fundamental threat to it with your disruptions."

"In one of the branching futures from this point, the Time Lords wipe themselves out in the Last Great Time War against the Daleks. In another, Fenris the Hellbringer and the Order of the Black Sun unravel the Time Lords' earliest days. Still another path shows the Ferutu evolving instead of the Gallifreyans."

"And in another one, I'm a harmless Earth inventor who built the TARDIS in his backyard," the Doctor finished impatiently. "I've come to learn many of these alternatives in my travels. It's an unfortunate consequence of our mastery of time."

"But do you understand it?"

"You always were a disruptive figure, Doctor," Julie said. "Stealing a TARDIS, toppling and undermining hierarchies and overthrowing established systems, picking up companions from all across eternity to aid in your anarchy."

The Preservers circled the two Doctors, the topic of conversation riling them up greatly.

“We don’t even have time to list all the contradictions and paradoxes that have sprung up because you happened to turn up.” Once again she flung a finger accusingly at the shorter, younger Doctor. “The timelines twist and diverge at the end of this very life. How will you regenerate—falling off a cliff on Nlaka in 2025 during that Malreplicant business, shot in San Francisco in 1999, or sacrificing yourself to prevent General Tannis from taking over the universe? All of those happened, or will happen—yet won’t. Each of those regenerations branch off into their own timeline. More tangling, more discontinuity. You end up with three different eighth incarnations ... and *four* ninth incarnations!”

“How old are you anyway—nine hundred or several thousand years?”

The Doctor’s natural answer—that both figures were true—remained unsaid, as the Preservers were barking more of their favourite inconsistencies in his life back at him.

“Atlantis! How can the same place be destroyed by two separate aliens and a Terran mad scientist?” cried Neil.

“When did the Dalek invasion take place—2000, 2150, or 2157?”

“Are you actually a doctor? Did you call yourself the Doctor before Ian Chesterton mistook you for I.M. Foreman?”

“What year were you exiled to Earth?”

“Then we come to the temporal anomalies spanning from Event One to the creation of life on Sol III on through the farther segments of time ...”

The younger Doctor made indignant rumblings of protest, but his successor waved at him dismissively. There was no use justifying actions to beings dedicated to permanent *inaction*. “Save my breath, old fellow. Who’s to say your popping in at this critical moment in my past life isn’t exactly what causes my seventh life to diverge the way it has? What you Preservers propose is to stop the fire by burning down the building. Take it from an expert. That timeline you created out there is worse than any incidental damage I’ve ever done.”

“That’s true!” the younger Doctor added. “We’ve seen the effects. If these readings are correct, it’s contracting. At present it only lasts one day—November 23, 2963. A day getting shorter and shorter as we speak.”

The Doctors double-checked the readings, nodding to each other with a teacher’s disdain. “Yes, yes. Oh, you Preservers. Your project ... your quest for consistency ... you’ve made the mistake so many before you have. History cannot be consistent. It kills and destroys and undermines as much as it creates and allows to flourish. But with that can come progress and innovation. The alternative is entropy, futility. Believe me when I say it, I’ve seen it before. That’s what I see out there in that pointless reality of yours.”

The Preservers turned away. “If you don’t do it for the universe’s sake, do it for your own.”

“The version of you we’ve created may be a child, but he is happier and more productive, than you ever were. Rather than a battle-weary Time Lord ducking responsibility and languishing in the backwaters of the universe, you could have a home, a life, and a career.”

Both Doctors looked askance. “I beg your pardon?” they asked in unison.

“You could be a successful ruler, a bringer of stability.”

“What about my companions? What about my family? Are they part of this new version of my life?”

The Preservers’ faces were impossible to see now in their glowing brilliance, but they were clearly marked with something like shame. “They cannot be a part of it, Doctor. You know why.”

“Exactly. And that’s it, right there. In your quest to bring order and consistency to my life, you’ve taken away everything meaningful to me. No wonder that little nightmare dressed up like me is worse than any tyrant, mad scientist, fanatic, or conspirator I’ve ever encountered!”

“A man is the sum of his memories,” his earlier self added, “*and* his misfortunes.”

Julie smiled coldly, her mouth a gaping void of darkness in the sizzling sunlight of her skin. “Ultimately, Doctors, your opinions are of little consequence. You cannot escape, and your deaths will trigger the final act of the project. We will cause the earlier Doctor to change his appearance into our last Doctor. The successive Doctors will all thus cease to exist. There will only ever be, only ever *have* been, one Doctor. Our Doctor, the last Doctor.”

Both Doctors looked around. The archaic screen filled up with more faces, with all the Doctors that were or ever could be. The Doctor saw himself collapsing into the sand on Androzani Minor with Peri in his arms, clinging for dear life on the Pharos radio telescope, recoiling back from being murdered by Rachel ‘Silver’ Silverstein. Some of their faces were recognised by the two Doctors watching on in horror, some were unfamiliar; but in a matter of moments, all would be wiped from the face of existence. From the stone panels, forks of lightning seized the Preservers, who were using readying to throw the energy back out to kill their Time Lord foe.

“Our fourth and most powerful Preserver draws near.”

“When all four Preservers are united, we can fulfil our great purpose.”

“The project will be complete!”

“*The Project!*” the Preservers exclaimed in terrifying unison.

Outside in the vault, Maggie warned the others of the approaching visitors. Thus, they were able to press themselves against the wall when the Master, the ten-year-old, and Daisy strolled in.

Nimue tackled the Master easily, overpowering the evil Time Lord and flinging his Tissue Compression Eliminator out of reach. Sir Gawain had the boy in his grasp, but Daisy attacked the knight, who was chivalrously unprepared for her aggression. Ollie and Maggie, feeling out of their depth, flung the odd punch and kick at her, but none were prepared for the massive explosion of energy she flung from herself.

Daisy seemed to grow as they all lay immobile on the floor, their bodies rippling with energy that flooded from her fingertips. Her skin turned translucent, and her voice dropped an octave.

“Not so dizzy as you appeared,” Maggie said to Daisy.

“My fellow Preservers have the other Doctors in their power,” she informed them. “You have done me a service getting this other puny Time Lord away from me.”

Not satisfied with emasculating the Master verbally, she propelled a bolt of flame at the evil Time Lord, sending him flying clear across the chamber, stopping with a painful crack against the carvings. The structure of the vault seemed to smoulder and degrade as Daisy passed. Daisy then picked up the last Doctor in her arms and carried him to fulfil his part of the Preservers’ project.

The Doctor felt the energy ravaging his body. The Preservers were using the most effective way to kill anybody—time. With their great powers, they had the advantage of being able to shoot it in compressed form out of their fingertips. They were flinging years at the Doctor, pushing his body to its natural demise, so the renewal could begin.

He looked across and saw his other self, flickering in and out of existence. All those other selves the Preservers were watching would cease to be. With this act, he would see the change first-hand, see his future vanish before his eyes and be replaced with their travesty. It seemed the height of irony to resolve a paradox by creating one. All this for universal peace—hadn't someone written about that moral quandary?

The Doctor couldn't think straight. The change was about to come. Worse, he began to see memories—not of the past but the future—through the different eyes. The boy was battling the Therianthropes. The boy was palling around with Section Thirteen, not caring of the plight of the humans they were thoughtlessly controlling. And on it went throughout his travels. Every thought, every act of good he had ever needed to think about, he looked ahead and saw undone.

It felt like the end.

Chapter Seven

Physician, Heal Thyself

The night sky of Camelot seemed all the darker streaked with the barbaric illuminations of uncanny lightning, coming not from above, but shooting from below, randomly and savagely. Outside the hidden tomb, the scarecrow knights cast their hay-filled helmets up to look at the mayhem. The scarecrow at the front pulled an Omega Dial, the Gallifreyan Absolute Chronometer, from its pocket. The white-point needle was spinning to the danger zone. Years were racing backwards and forwards with no regard to causality or harmony. Luckily for the synthetic beings, they had been purposely designed to withstand the chaos. The readings confirmed that temporal stability was collapsing; they were on the verge of witnessing the terrible calamity they had been sent to prevent.

The scarecrow waved its fellows forward. Their masters, the Time Lords, would be most aggrieved if they had left it too late.

Maggie Weitz wondered why she felt so much pain. She was where she belonged, in Revelstoke, driving her cousin Larry to the dentist on an ordinary morning in May of 1995. She had a day ahead of her at the hardware store, and then Larry had promised to cook her dinner—given the agony the visit was likely to incur, it was going to be a lot of soft food, soup and ice cream.

The events that day that had led her into the Doctor's life would now never happen. She would never meet him, never know she hadn't met him. Her life would go on. That, she knew as she ran through the motions of her routine, was why it was so painful. It was not a physical sensation. It was an unbearable weight of regret.

Yet she was not going through her day—she was merely observing herself go through it. Something like gauze separated her from herself, and it was vital that she did not cross it. It was a conscious effort of willpower, but she had to hold on, fight through this strain on her mind ...

She felt a hand pull her away. It had a most unusual texture, hundred of thin, stiff fibers but overall soft ... a hand made of hay ...

She was on the stone floor of the wrecked vault. Its statues had collapsed around them, and its stone now looked mottled and charred from age. It had turned to a ruin in moments thanks to Daisy walking through.

And all around them, scarecrows—dressed like the one in the field, in the strange anachronistic armour like Sir Gawain wore—were busy. Two were lifting some masonry away from the prone Master. Some more were fussing over Nimue, who angrily pushed them away. And one was by Maggie's side, helping her to her feet.

"Th-thank you," she stammered.

The scarecrow touched its gauntlet to its helmet in mute appreciation.

A painfully slender, fair-haired man with a wispy blond moustache strode through the vault, hands behind his back. His Norman-era tabard and hessian robes contrasted with his disreputable demeanour—all he needed was a cigarette holder and he would make a first-rate 1930s cad. His scarecrow minions seemed to have missed Ollie, who lay slumped against one of the Preservers' coffins. The man helped him back to his feet and issued commands to the group as Maggie approached.

"You must be Maggie Weitz, the Doctor's companion. And you're her deceased husband Ollie, brought back to life through timeline-altering?" The man in the moustache bowed. "I am the Waiter."

"Great," Ollie replied through his daze. "I could use a large Scotch."

The Waiter's blond moustache quivered in aggravation. "I meant that I'm the Time Lord who was assigned to wait here for ... what's the Earth expression? 'All hell to break loose'? Where is the Doctor?"

"Have you checked those stone coffin things?" Ollie asked.

They approached the massive blocks of stone, but now each glass panel showed only an empty chamber within.

Maggie gripped the Waiter's arm and tried to push the scarecrows out with him. "He's in there! And Daisy, and the boy ... they're all in there! I'm sure he's in trouble! Get after him quickly!"

"Not to worry, ma'am," the Waiter replied, somewhat tetchily pulling his arm free of her. He smiled in a way that was no doubt intended to reassure her. "We're Time Lords. We always get there in time."

This part was one of the trickiest needles for a time traveller to thread. The Doctor was both experiencing events as they happened and remembering them in real time. He had seen through his 957-year-old eyes that the Preservers had racked his eleventh self with their temporal assault to prevent him from helping himself while they sped his life along to its inevitable death by old

age. The memory had been a little vivid, but now that his past and his future had caught up with him it came into focus with painful sharpness.

The challenge was all the greater as his memory was distorting alongside. Like his seventh self, the eleventh Doctor was seeing the boy crudely imposing himself on his past, getting wrong all those moments he had put right. He had to look past that, prevent those alternatives, by keeping his focus on now, this most critical moment happening in front of him.

He remembered their white-hot beams frying that emerald-green balmacaan coat. That memory would prompt his seventh self to take the precaution of lining the coat with chronodyne, grains of which were in the tiny vial Nimue had given his younger self. The beams thus bounced off the Doctor and ricocheted across the three Preservers.

It was working. Their temporal assault ended and the Doctor, feeling about a century older, fumbled in his jacket pocket for that vial. His aging fingers ached as they gripped its narrow glass, but he was able to hurl it right at the Key to Time.

The vial shattered against the Key to Time, the grains of chronodyne boring into the crystal, splintering the Key back into its constituent parts. The Preservers doubled over in pain, their insubstantial arms reaching out desperately as the segments floated out of their grasp, inexorably drawn across time and space to their rightful hiding places, from Ribos to Zeos.

The floor beneath them splintered, the blue timeless light of the vortex cracking through to Camelot. The Doctor inwardly sighed with relief that his guess was correct—without the Key to Time, the fault lines between realities could reopen. Time was no longer fixed, and they still had a fighting chance.

The Preservers were drawn irresistibly toward the fissures. They floated inside, like moths flitting to a flame.

The Doctor turned around to see not just his seventh incarnation, but numbers eight, nine, and ten standing and looking on.

“Strength in numbers, old chap,” the ninth Doctor remarked sardonically.

“Oh, I suppose you three were standing back to admire us doing all the difficult work?”

“Be fair,” his eighth self said, clutching his forehead. “We’re a bit shaky after being killed prematurely.”

“And don’t forget,” the tenth Doctor remarked snidely, “us observing you helped you remember what to do all the better.”

“Hmm.” The Doctor looked from the three back to his seventh self. “And what did I do?”

The seventh Doctor chuckled as his future self-looked on. “You drew the Preservers to one of the infinite number of parallel universes, allowing them to find their own patch and guide its development from the start, rather than trying to impose their will on an existing continuum!”

He slapped the short man’s shoulder. “Couldn’t have put it better ...”

“Myself? I’d agree with that. Quite neat, laddie! Wicked, in fact! We did well!”

He did not understand why his older selves still looked so gloomy. Then he realised he was remembering his experiences.

“This isn’t over yet,” his tenth self-declared ominously.

He was not surprised when a glowing silver being that had once been Daisy Wyler drifted into the room. In her arms was the prone form of the boy.

“The last and most powerful of the Preservers,” the Doctor concluded. “Disguised under the nose of that foolish, love-struck boy.” He indicated the vortex opening up. “I don’t suppose you’d care to join your friends shaping another universe?”

“Sadly not,” Daisy simpered. “I am not so easily led astray. This crossroads can still be closed and time reshaped by me alone. The last Doctor is a paradox and while he and you exist side by side, time will perpetually be out of joint.” She pushed the boy forward. He came to his senses and smiled maliciously.

“You know what you have to do,” she commanded him.

He nodded and leapt through the air, diving headfirst into the vortex.

The Preserver’s featureless face carried the unmistakable appearance of a sneer. “He shall slip into your past, Doctor. While my weakling fellows were lured sideways in time by your petty deception, he shall go back ... back to your beginning.”

Gallifrey, long before the Rassilon Era

The woman hugged the little scamp, and he cherished the contact.

“No more hugs where I’m going,” he mumbled self-pityingly.

She smiled. “Life always seems harder when you’re eight years old.”

That wasn’t much consolation. He trudged away. The guards did not react as he approached their coach. But he noticed a new face beside them and that ferret-faced *valeyard*. It was another child—a boy broader in the shoulder than he was, wearing retrograde Earth clothes whose colours stood starkly against the parched desert. The other boy’s eyes gleamed malevolently.

The Waiter and his detachment of scarecrows marched to the threshold of the inner sanctum. He could see the Doctors—the five most recent real incarnations and the young pretender—wincing at the dazzling light of a fearsome Preserver in its natural form. One of those self-important Knights of the Round Table—Sir Gawain, he believed—was readying himself to attack, but the Waiter knew that this solution needed brains, not brawn. “Right then, let’s put a stop to this,” he declared. The scarecrow knights drew themselves up in imitation, and together they entered the room.

But then he found himself back at the far end of the corridor. The scarecrows looked around, and the Waiter waved away their confusion, irritated. He *had* a brain, after all, so why was he as in the dark as they were?

When he reached it a second time and found himself still standing at the far end, the Waiter reluctantly concluded that the Earth woman, Maggie, may have had a point. Time was not on their side.

The rippling purple of the vortex split wider. Doctors seven through eleven all held each other by the shoulders, straining with all their might and struggling to muster enough energy to make it out. But the almighty pressure of the vacuum sucking them in was hard to resist.

The seventh Doctor's expressive face was gurning in pain. "Sorry, I'll ... only slow you down ..." he croaked.

The other three were looking equally drained. It was possible they could all wither to death just standing here. It was vital the Doctor didn't think of that, and he hoped none of them did either. Instead, he stoically declared, "We're not dead yet, old chaps."

His rapidly aging seventh incarnation smiled weakly at his older self. "Who are you calling old, laddie?" he asked, managing an indignant flicker.

"That's the spirit. Hold on a little longer!"

The Preserver stood by the darkening fissure, arms splayed triumphantly, and that blank face now infused with triumphant anger. How easy it would have been to run away, to leave her to her own fate.

That was the way of the Last Doctor. But it was not *his* way. He had to make that commitment if this encounter was ever to mean anything and lead away from the dark paths that seemed inescapable. So the Doctor stayed, and extended his hand to her. "That gap will widen—if we're not careful we'll all end up tumbling through it. Come with me—I can give you another chance."

She looked back at him and the wide black of her eyes looked on him spitefully.

Then the chasm widened, and the whole chamber flooded with the purple temporal energy.

Sir Gawain and Nimue had led Maggie and Ollie back outside the icy tomb. They stood in the darkness, their faces only occasionally illuminated by the violent flashes of multicoloured light. Maggie buried her face in the crook of Ollie's arm.

"The barriers are lifting!" Nimue cried in delight. "The crossroads in time is restored! The Doctor has succeeded!"

"But where is he?" Maggie asked desperately.

When the figure dashed out through the solid rock-wall, she desperately hoped for a minute it was him; she tried not to be too angry or saddened when she saw the Waiter, his blond hair streaked with grey.

"No way out," he said sadly. "Time fields are growing wider and more unstable. Already lost three hundred years in there, any more and I might regenerate. Come on."

Maggie pushed against them all as hard as she could, but Ollie pulled her away. Through tears she cried, "What was the point of bringing us here if we couldn't do anything to help him? What was the point?"

"To give him the strength to make that final sacrifice," Ollie pondered.

"Your jester is right, my lady," Nimue counselled. "Don't make that sacrifice a vain one. Come with us."

She collapsed into Ollie's arms, sobbing. Worse, her husband's touch felt hollow in her hands.

There was little visible of the tomb, more and more of it crumbling away as the crossroads in time burst through. Like a great flood, the Preservers' attempts to hold back its flow had only made its break more violent.

The Doctor heard his younger selves straining over the cacophony of the vortex. "Have to ... hold it back ... or else we'll be pulled in ..." He was fumbling in the pockets of his coat, and finally pulled out a Phillips-head screwdriver.

"Pitiful!" roared the Preserver. "Not even sonic!"

"True, true ..." the seventh Doctor wheezed. "But it will serve the ... purpose ... righty-tighty, lefty-loosy!"

And with one last burst of energy, he slotted it into the base of the stone control panel, and gave it a vigorous counter-clockwise twist.

The Doctor didn't quite believe it. The colours subsided, and the fragile skin of reality around them held for a few critical moments longer. That simple screwdriver was holding the machinery in place just long enough to keep the room together. The five of them wasted no time in running.

The Preserver was pulled backwards into the maelstrom. The Doctor felt sorry, but it was at least her choice.

On his way out, the Doctor took a sidelong glance at the ice tomb of Merlin before it subsided into another parallel dimension forever.

It was empty too.

The Doctors laughed as they ran, laughed as they watched the sizzling violet light envelop the tomb, only stopping to savour the desolate stillness descend on the cold air in place of the fury that had nearly sucked it in.

The forest was now cold, dark, and empty. Gawain and Nimue had no doubt slipped sideways to another realm, perhaps to Avalon with the other Knights of the Round Table. Here and now, and for the rest of this universe's timeline, Camelot and Tintagel would be a ruin, the real magical kingdom's location and secrets lost, their truth alive only in the myths of Britain.

He heard the last strains of a TARDIS dematerialising. The Time Lords had been next to useless—*plus ça change*—but at least they would see to it that Maggie got back home. Perhaps the Master would even get the punishment he deserved.

In the whirlwind, their other three selves had vanished. The Doctor sighed with relief as he felt them slotting back into the correct places in their rightful timelines—and Tamara Scott, Tom Brooker and Val Rossi, and Hannah Redfoot were all waiting for them.

He felt a pull at his shoulder, and to his surprise saw his seventh incarnation pulling away from his grip. "That's all right, young man! Quite all right!" He righted himself and indignantly straightened his Paisley-patterned tie, pushing his straw hat down on his head with his other hand, to capture his beloved negligent style. Somehow, through all the chaos, he'd even managed to hold on to his question-mark umbrella.

The Doctor looked himself up and down. "Well, you've bounced back."

He gave a chuckle of childlike delight and flashed his toothy smile at his successor. "Hmm, exactly! A momentary inconvenience, nothing more. Don't you feel it too? The energies of direct

exposure to alternative time have proved quite invigorating!” He puffed out his chest and slapped it proudly. “Breathe that air! Nothing’s fresher after you’ve cheated death for the millionth time! I feel six hundred again!” He slapped the back of his older self. “You don’t look too bad yourself ... old man!” Chuckling uproariously, he watched as the older Doctor touched his face uncertainly.

“Hold on, what are you so chipper about?” the Doctor impatiently interrupted himself.

“You can feel your earlier selves back in their rightful places in your history, can’t you?”

“Yes, yes, but the Preserver still got that boy into our past! Time is malleable again, but *he’ll* be roaming around in it instead of us. I might regenerate into him any minute now.”

That pensive brow furrowed. “Will he? What makes you so sure? Where do you think the young upstart ended up then?”

Another flurry of laughter loosed as his earlier self’s memories caught up across the centuries ...

The child went off in the coach, and the last Doctor chased after it. It had gone right past him, as if no one had even noticed. The guards and the *valeyard* brushed past, walking through him as if he weren’t even there.

“Hey! Wait a minute! I’m the Doctor now! I should be in that coach, not him! Take me to Prydon Academy! Come back!”

Then, as he turned around, the last Doctor saw that the scene had faded. As soon as the child left, the House in the distance, the revenant family members standing at the window, they all vanished like ...

Like a dream ...

The last Doctor rounded a corner, to find southern Gallifrey gone. Instead he was standing in some dingy cobbled back streets of southeast London. The time period was about 1993, he estimated. His eyes were drawn to one building across the square: a red public house. The boy read its sign: THE QUEEN VICTORIA. A woman stood by its door, her hands on her hips.

A dream, all right ... a familiar dream ...

“Oh no ... I know this place ...”

He turned, but there was nowhere to run: Albert Square stretched as far as he could see. He turned back to the woman, pulling a hefty laser rifle from her purple robes and cackling with delight. He knew her face.

“You’re going on a journey, Doctor ...” the Rani drawled. “A very long journey!”

“You see, the crossroads in time doesn’t *just* lead to parallel realities, but to the realms beyond reality. Perhaps even to stranger things ...”

“Well, there’s nowhere stranger than that blasted dream of mine.”

The little fellow nodded and tapped his temple mischievously. “Perhaps nothing is more real than what goes on in our own minds. Especially when you get to our age and time has been fiddled and rewritten around us so often.”

“Isn’t that a tad self-absorbed?”

The earlier Doctor's dark bushy eyebrows wiggled impishly. "I don't know. To be is to be perceived and all that. And after all, what are dreams but our very own private universe?"

The Doctor cocked an eyebrow at his younger self. "It doesn't concern you having a malevolent, immature splinter of ourselves stuck in our own subconscious?"

"Oh, not at all. He did spring *from* us, after all—perhaps we do have some dark desires buried in us somewhere; for power, for recognition, like the Valeyard. Maybe my impulse to play games and lay traps for my enemies could, in another realm, have led me to that end. But on the other hand, more benignly, perhaps like the boy we also still wish to find home, to love and be loved, and to see peace and harmony across the universe."

The Doctor nodded. "Very wise. We shouldn't judge him too harshly."

"Indeed not. Only through understanding ourselves can we hope to understand the universe, wouldn't you say?"

The Doctor smiled ruefully. "Apparently, I just did."

The other Doctor tutted at the sight of an object lying in the undergrowth and squatted to pick it up. "Dear me. Typical of our people, treating the universe as a rubbish bin. Those scarecrows were in such a hurry, they left this behind."

"An Omega dial, isn't it?"

"Mm, and look at the reading on the dial's white-point needle"

Both Doctor knew the properties of white-point crystal, which drew on the Eye of Harmony itself to naturally measure time passage in absolute terms. Therefore, the substance could never be affected by time distortion or alteration. Whatever number it read was the inalterable time that had passed. The Doctor converted the dial's reading into Earth numbers, but scarcely believed the results.

"Nine hundred years?"

Again he looked at his younger self, and again couldn't fathom the broad grin on his usually soulful face.

"And counting ... exhilarating isn't it? Feeling the tides of time fluxing and rejigging all around us."

"I've gained *nine hundred* years of experiences, lives, and memories?"

"At least. Maybe more!"

The eleventh Doctor flashed the thinnest of smiles and touched his forehead. "Wouldn't surprise me one bit. It feels like nine hundred years since I've had a lie-down or a decent cup of tea."

"Oh, you're just getting soft in your old age!" the younger Doctor chided, prodding him with the tip of his broly and laughing uproariously again.

They both breathed a sigh of relief to see the TARDIS, bathed in the glow of moonlight, where they had left it in the clearing. By this time, the kaleidoscope of colours had settled, the eldritch mists had parted, and the night sky was cold, clear, and placid. There would still be the occasional rupture—the odd dragon or demon might pop through, the odd spell might carry unintended powers—but in the main, stability had returned to this time.

And one day, this would be home—for a while anyway. That much still seemed certain. The Doctor gave the gloomy autumnal Camelot one last look, and said to the empty lands, "See you earlier." He followed himself inside and shut the door; moments later, the TARDIS vanished.

When they were inside, it was the eleventh Doctor's turn to be exhausted. He collapsed into his favourite armchair, leaving the newly invigorated old man to dash around the console in delight.

When they were on their way, he turned, patting his chest. "Ah, I shan't be here much longer, I can feel it. I'm being drawn back to my rightful place in space and time." He crossed the console room and pressed a hand against his later self's closely cropped head. "I think there might be some tea left in the pot. I hope it didn't go cold."

He passed the older Doctor a cup, and was pleased when he sipped it gratefully. "I don't know why, but I'm feeling terribly dizzy. You don't think ..."

"Oh, no no. There's plenty of life in your old body yet. It's perfectly simple. Absorption of parallel time. Those extra nine hundred-odd years in the same life span are catching up with you." He massaged his successor's scalp playfully. "I don't think your head will swell up, but you may find yourself with a few new experiences, maybe even new selves tucked in where you least expect them. Probably in the wrong order."

He was feeling it, and the dizziness increased at the awareness. "You're right ... memories I'm sure weren't there before ... selves I'm sure I never was ... it's too much!"

"You'll cope." The little man turned. Already his body was becoming transparent, the TARDIS sending him back to those many centuries ago.

"But how will I know what's real? Who I am and who all those other selves are? It was hard enough before ..."

"Remember what that tongue-tied playwright said: 'All is true.' Except the parts that aren't."

"How helpful."

"If anyone can handle it, I know *you* can. Thank you for saving me from myself, eh?"

"Thank *you* for not shooting me."

He doffed his hat. "Any time."

"My regards to Ace."

"My thanks to Maggie. And Doctor ... look after the universe, eh? It is a lot of work keeping it in good shape." With another enigmatic chuckle, that elfin old face faded from sight.

Chapter Eight

Gently Down The Stream ...

The Doctor woke up.

He woke up with a crick in his neck in that Jacobean armchair, hearing Jamie and Zoe saying that the TARDIS was hovering over the dark side of the moon. Tom Brooker and Val Rossi shook him awake. At one moment he was surrounded by the ambient serenity of Castrovalva—barely even knowing who he was, so sleepy he hadn't even taken off his new coat and cricket sweater. Hannah Redfoot's voice filled his ears, warning him the TARDIS was out of control. He felt the blast of Antarctic air on his cheeks from Frobisher leaving the TARDIS doors open. Tamara Scott and Grae were bringing him around from a doze in 2048 Maui. Mortimer the cat brushed his tail against the sleeping Time Lord in a rare display of feline affection. And the irresistible aroma of Sergeant Benton's coffee—rivalling the cups Mrs. Pepys used to brew him—roused him back to sensibility in his lab at UNIT headquarters.

His eighth, ninth, and tenth selves awoke to find they had never visited that hazy empty house, or that abandoned freighter in deep space, or San Francisco in 1986. Their lives were their own again, untroubled by any brushes with murderous children.

Now, his seventh self had no sooner disappeared from the control room of his future self than he was rejoicing at the sound of Ace in his ear, crying, "Professor! You'll sleep the whole day away! Now, where are we headed next?"

He opened his eyes, leapt up from his easy chair, and found himself in his familiar TARDIS, and flung his arms around his dear friend, back by his side.

"Steady on Professor, no need to go all mushy."

He let go of her with a self-conscious chuckle. "No, certainly not, Ace. And you're quite right—there's no time for sleeping on the job. We've got work to do."

Now it was three regenerations earlier and he was on Brighton beach, wrapped up warm against the charming English weather in a brand-new plum scarf, plum fedora, and plum greatcoat, his rest rudely interrupted by Romana plonking K9 in his lap. "Look what you've done!"

“What have I done?” he mumbled, barely awake.

“You’ve got the date wrong, you’ve got the season wrong, and you’ve got K9’s seawater defenses wrong!”

“Well, I can’t get everything right,” he observed, beaming.

And last of all—or was it first?—hundreds of years earlier, he felt the hand of Barbara Wright at his right shoulder and Ian Chesterton shaking his left.

“Doctor!”

“Doctor, wake up!”

Every time, in every life, the Doctor experienced a scant and terrifying second of his two future selves’ adventures, against that bratty boy. The second passed, and then, to his immense joy, he realised—as all his successors did at their respective moments of waking—he was back where he should be.

The Doctor rubbed his eyes. He looked around his familiar TARDIS. He was not alone! It almost made him leap out of his Eames chair in delight. There were Barbara and Ian looking down at him with their usual paternal concern as he shook away the funk of sleep.

“Hmm? What’s the matter? What is it? Oh, goodness gracious me, don’t tell me I went off to sleep!”

“Yes,” Ian answered, “and at a very critical time. Oh well, I suppose it did you a world of good.”

He could have kissed the pair of them, so glad was he to see them. No Susan of course—a goodbye that would never lose its sting—but at least he had these two, first dear human friends. He clapped Ian on the shoulders, patted the teacher’s cheek, and laughed. “Deep in the arms of Morpheus, eh my boy?”

“Oh but Doctor,” Barbara interrupted, “the trembling’s stopped!”

“Oh my dear,” he said to Barbara, clutching her by the hands. “I’m so glad you’re feeling better, hmm?”

In Revelstoke, British Columbia, the date was May 15, 1998. Maggie Weitz woke in her familiar room, the usual view of Mount Begbie visible outside her window. She spent a few blissful moments still feeling Ollie’s embrace, having him pressed against her as if they were one person, hearing his words in her ear.

“Whatever happens ... don’t forget this ... don’t forget me ...”

The words carried on the wind, as if he were in the next room.

But as soon as she reached her arm out, she knew she was alone. She knew he was dead, like he had been since that horrible day four years ago. But he had been alive ... all of it had happened, surely?

A phrase nagged at Maggie. She thought she heard Ollie’s voice saying it: *All is true*.

She walked through the house to make sure she was alone.

It was a beautiful day in May. The reassuringly Canadian sounds of a Glenn Gould recording on the CBC filled her front room. There were no monsters about, nor any boy-imitators of the Doctor. Nor, on the other hand, was there the Doctor himself. The lawn outside the front

of her house looked almost invitingly empty, as if welcoming the materialisation of an antique British police telephone box. But nothing appeared.

The sharp trill of a bicycle bell caused Maggie to start. Mr. Lee leaned toward her, waving a greeting. "There's my employee of the month! Did you start working part-time or something?"

"N-no," Maggie answered in confusion.

"No worries. Luckily Wednesday morning isn't our peak time for hardware sales. Just let me know in future if you can't come in. I know you're still getting used to being back from abroad, but even so ..." He saw tears welling up in Maggie's eyes, and hastily added, "Whoah, whoah, I'm just yanking your chain, Weitz." He took a step nearer, pondering the tact of offering her a hug. Instead, his arms hovered at an awkward height as he cajoled her: "Hey, come on, this isn't like you! You've got the toughest skin of anyone I know."

"No, no ... it isn't that. I'll ... see you later."

"Sure." A little shell-shocked, Mr. Lee climbed back on the bicycle.

"Hey? This may sound stupid ..."

"Not at all, Maggie, what is it?"

"What ... what day is it?"

With another smile, Mr. Lee adopted an excruciating Cockney accent and said, "'Today? Why it's Christmas Day!' Nah, it's the fifteenth of May."

As Mr. Lee cycled off to work, Maggie returned inside to have a shower and get dressed. She remembered how dazed the Doctor had looked when he woke up in the TARDIS ... yesterday, she supposed? But now dozens of routine days in Revelstoke, weekends with friends, trips to Vancouver to see her favourite cousin Larry, high holidays with other members of the Weitz family ... they all slotted into place in her mind, a second later feeling as if they had always been there, the feeling that they had happened somehow unsettling. The timelines at their mysterious work again.

She tried to hold on to those few hours she had spent with Ollie. They were real.

"All is true," she repeated to herself.

She thought with worry about those five long months in 1997 she had been stuck here, and how much longer it would take the Doctor to find her this time.

Before she went into work, Maggie contrived to visit the cemetery. She spent a long while at Ollie's grave, closing her eyes and reliving every second of that special extra time she had with him. Then she went back over their whole marriage. Her memory was even less reliable than a TARDIS, but it was the only time machine she could count on for the moment. The Doctor seemed to be steering clear of 1998, to be sure.

She stopped at the front door, and Mr. Lee patted her on the shoulder, contrite. "My mistake, Weitz! I completely forgot that message your uncle left. No wonder you were confused! Sorry for ragging you."

She immediately brightened, flinging her arms around the gangly old shopkeeper and running down the street. There, amid the flannels and jeans of the regular townspeople, a familiar tall figure in ankle-length emerald green cashmere and cable-knit cream wool stood out. The Doctor was stepping out of the bakery, a paper bag full of groceries seeming out of place in his hands.

She did not stop running until she had her arms firmly around him.

"Sorry I took so long, the old girl has extraordinary difficulty landing in the 1990s."

She nodded. "I got Mr. Lee's message. I assume you're my uncle?"

"Correct."

"Where to?"

"Well, there's a worrying temporal flicker in the Riifken Expanse, I have to return a library book to Alexandria, and Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart has run into something peculiar in a recently unearthed Peruvian temple ... but all that can wait. You and I need to go somewhere quiet for a change."

Epilogue

The First Sunrise

The superheated ball of gas that would one day be dubbed Sol rose on a rocky, barren landscape. On the planet next door, amino acids had just combined to create the first tentative life. But here on Mars, Maggie stood silently and watched the beautiful spectacle, seeing her planet in the Martian sky and the sun beyond it.

The Doctor stood beside her, sighing in wonder. "It's the little things that make time travel worthwhile, you know."

She nodded, and it was only much later that she brought up the subject that had gnawed at her since they had parted. "I know if there was any way you could *really* have saved Ollie, you would have," she said softly. "I know you want to save everyone. But a universe that runs the proper billions of aeons, full of other people, is too big a price to pay to have my husband back. And he'd be the first to admit it." She wiped away a tear. "And I got that extra time with him. How lucky was I!"

As the Doctor laid an old tartan blanket across a stretch of the Martian soil and spread out some sandwiches and an Antarean finger-food buffet, Maggie told him more stories about Ollie. If he heard them before, he didn't show it. "They're all the better now that I've actually met him."

"And it was nice to meet you ... the other you ... he made it back OK? And the three others?"

"I wouldn't be here if they hadn't." The Doctor told her a little about what had happened, but there was a moment of sadness he didn't want to sustain, as he quickly changed the subject to his checking in on whether history was back on course.

"I assume Earth is back to being a polluted, overcrowded dump in the thirtieth century?"

"I'm afraid so. If it's any consolation, it gets better ... oh! But then I went back to 1963, and landed in that same junkyard in Totter's Lane. And who should I meet?"

"I've no idea."

“Constable Reg Cranfield!”

Maggie laughed. “He didn’t moon you this time, I hope!”

“No, he was back to normal, thankfully. Everything is ...”

“Except you. I can tell.” She peered at his youthful face, now lined with doubt. He looked no older, but he *felt* older. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really.” He looked up at Earth. “I’ve gained centuries of additional experiences from those other timelines. I can see so much ... it’s still hard for me to hold onto ... and, well ... it’s made certain tasks necessary.”

It was at this point that Maggie noticed the woman standing behind the TARDIS. The Doctor seemed to sense her presence, looking back and nodding to her in eerily perfect timing with her arrival. When he turned back to Maggie, those extra centuries were written plainly on his face. He looked as if he’d seen a ghost.

“So she’s back ...” he muttered, half to himself. “Just as she said she would be ...”

“Not an old flame, Doctor?”

“Someone a little more ... difficult to describe. You might say a childhood friend ...”

“So where are we going? Gallifrey? Back to Camelot? Returning that library book?” He smiled at each of her suggestions, and each smile made Maggie momentarily upbeat, but then she shook her head. “Back to Revelstoke. For me, at least. This is goodbye, isn’t it?”

“All of the above, I’m afraid. If she’s here ... it means I have to face something that’s never happened before ...” He smiled and clasped Maggie’s hand in his. They held the contact for a long time. “There are strange new crises brewing.”

“So what else is new?” Maggie chided.

“But I will be back to see you, when it all blows over.”

“Hey, you made it back from that, Doc. Whatever comes next ... will be a cinch.”

The woman was not there when they walked back to the TARDIS. Maggie was relieved—not that she expected the Doctor to confide in her, but merely that she could focus entirely on parting with her friend without some mystery figure lurking over her shoulder, tapping her watch. And to Maggie’s relief, they were able to say goodbye—“*Au revoir*,” the Doctor insisted—on their own, outside the front door of her familiar house on Vernon Avenue in Revelstoke, on the same beautiful May afternoon in 1998. But Maggie would never see it that way again. Like her house, in spite of the beautiful surroundings and the contentment of the moment, she would look back on this and feel colder and emptier.

“I wish there was more time,” he said.

“Me too. But there never is ... even for us time travellers, eh?”

He nodded sadly.

She ran her hand along his smooth cheek. “Before you get started on this wild adventure ahead of you, Doctor, get some rest.”

Knowing she would never forgive herself otherwise, she clutched his face and kissed him—not romantically, but with love all the same.

Maggie had a tendency to gabble through farewells—all those school friends who passed through Revelstoke or those she bumped into in Vancouver or Seattle, she would make some rash

plan to grab a drink or see a play, always aware how ludicrous and unlikely it would be. This time, it seemed doubly pointless to pretend they might bump into each other randomly. This time, she chose her words carefully.

As did the Doctor. After a few heartfelt words of parting that she would hold forever in her heart, he retreated sadly into the police box, and Maggie watched it fade from view. But she did not feel the desolation she had when she woke up that morning. He would be back.

The journey would be a long one, and that special woman from his past was not due to meet him until he landed. He looked at the coordinates—not Earth, not Gallifrey or Skaro ... a place he had never been before. She would have much to say to him, and they had even more to do together. He could scarcely imagine the next chapter. But that was all to come. Right now, the Doctor had a few hours to himself. He decided Maggie was right. A bit of shuteye would do him the world of good.

He shrugged off his balmacaan coat and hung it up, slipped off his fisherman's sweater, and donned those ratty cat-patterned pyjamas. He read a few lines of *The Time Machine*, but found his eyes too heavy to finish the chapter.

He closed his eyes, and said aloud:

"Goodnight, TARDIS. Goodnight, Maggie, Kaylaar, Simon Denon, Reg. Goodnight Susan, Ace, and Romana, Liz Shaw, Jamie and Sarah Jane Smith, K9, Brigadier, Frobisher, Grae, Hannah ..." On he went, naming each and ever companion with whom he had travelled, telling them, "I love you all."

The Doctor strained against sleep, desperate not to leave anyone out. Finally, he whispered drowsily, "Goodnight to all of time and space. All parallel universes, all the dimensions, even the shadow ones. All reality, all un-reality. I hope while I'm grabbing forty winks, you can all take care of yourselves, eh?"

Everyone, wherever and whenever they were, heard the Doctor for a moment, and felt happier for it. And that in turn made the Doctor feel happier.

And having thanked them all, the Doctor drifted off to sleep. And the Doctor dreamed.

Afterword

Lately, the question of worth and value in creative endeavours has been much debated. No one but the most cynical would have foreseen that writing by artificial intelligence would be a seriously discussed outcome of the 2023 Writers Guild of America strike. Does such writing devalue communal and decidedly non-profit endeavours like *The Doctor Who Project*? It's an irresolvable debate, but I personally prefer to think that removing worth, taking away that price tag, ultimately detaches the kind of work we fans do from the miserable label of 'content' and enhances the value of our writing.

Doctor Who has seen its ups and downs in this marketplace. When Bob Furnell and Misha Lauenstein began this odyssey in late 1998, the TV show's stock could not have been lower—over two years after the TV Movie, with Paul McGann's sensational Eighth Doctor dead before he could truly live, relegated to another disembodied head plonked on the drab BBC-sanctioned merchandise. In a funny way, its present status, and worth, as a unit of profitable British IP, streaming internationally on Disney+ in their bid to acquire and profit from the sum total of human culture, now seems the inevitable end result of this sorry limbo. For how many times in those untamed wilderness years of the 1990s and 2000s did we hear that the BBC would dearly love to make *Doctor Who*, but just couldn't manage it without some American angel investor stumping up the cash for all those state-of-the-art special effects we were told were vital to its future success?

Bob et al weren't satisfied with that unimaginative cant, and having plenty of ideas themselves, decided to take the reins. In *The Doctor Who Project's* debut season in March 1999, they introduced an older McCoy Doctor suffering from amnesia, but he swiftly regenerated into their own newly created eighth incarnation (played, in the metafictional realm of the *Project's* production, by Jeremy Banks-Walker). Banks-Walker sported a similar tousled mane to McGann but with a decidedly unprecedented beard (a development not seen in any 'official' incarnation until John Hurt's War Doctor in 2013; a minor trail to blaze, but TDWP blazed it first). From the humble beginnings of *The Final Sunset* by John Gordon Swogger, Bob, and Misha, the TARDIS travelled to countless new worlds and times. After resolving what happened to Ace (a third, even more bizarre fate than the ones she had in the Virgin New Adventures and the *Doctor Who Magazine* comic strip), a bewildering ensemble of new companions were introduced, and this Doctor regenerated another three times (played, in the metafictional realm of the *Project's* production, by Anton Robbins, Laurent Meyer, and Winston Adderly).

Idiosyncratic it may be, but to my mind TDWP doesn't really divide by these Doctors' tenures, or by seasons (nineteen of them—who could have imagined that in 1999?). Instead, I consider it to have

spanned three untidy eras, with large separating gaps: the first four seasons from 1999 to 2002, a second wind coinciding and countering the glory days of BBC Wales from 2006 to about 2017, and then the final hurrah of Seasons 41 to 45 from 2020 to 2024.

Looking back on these early 2000s stories now, it's easy to see they were going in the direction we all thought *Doctor Who* would/ should go. Many seem inspired by *The X Files* and the *Star Trek* spin-offs, with a shadowy organization Section 13 haunting the Doctor's footsteps and much intergalactic politicking as a backdrop for the latest Dalek or Cyberman scheme for universal domination.

The nature of the *Project* was inevitably altered by the triumphant return of *Doctor Who* in 2005. Bob could have hung up his implausibly long scarf, slipped his TARDIS key through the postbox, and packed it in then. But he didn't, and instead *The Doctor Who Project* underwent a regeneration of its own, going from strength to strength, offering novel and sometimes surreal counter-programming to the parent show. OK, maybe it's true that only a handful of fans think the Ninth Doctor *isn't* a traumatised crop-haired drifter in a leather jacket, or the Tenth a self-satisfied Mockney wiseacre. But I like to think the Robbins and Meyer variants offer intriguing alternatives, proving the Doctor can be even more malleable than we fans can conceive. The *Project* benefitted from the general good cheer and enthusiasm of the BBC Wales rebirth, as writers and readers seemed to dig into these alternative adventures with even greater *joie de vivre*.

As with any fan venture, the quality is variable—that is the entire, glorious point. Over its vast lifespan, *The Doctor Who Project* has demonstrated it can be as brilliant, banal, and as bonkers as the show that inspired it. When Terry Nation created Davros in *Genesis of the Daleks*, could he have imagined a story where Tamara Scott falls in love with him (*Escape Pod* by Misha Lauenstein)? Having sown the seeds of Mike Yates' rebellion against UNIT in *Invasion of the Dinosaurs*, could Malcolm Hulke have foreseen the vengeful Yates who returns in Bob Furnell's *Death of a Brigadier*? When John Nathan-Turner mischievously proposed an animatronic cat companion for Colin Baker, was he merely setting the scene for *TDWP*'s inimitable Mortimer? Then there's Silver, the companion who murdered the Walker-Banks Doctor, and Tamara Scott erased from history a solid decade before Rory Williams. I'll say this about the *Project*, it's always had writers who think big.

Consistent across the *Project*'s quarter-century is the bravery of its editors Bob Furnell, Misha Lauenstein, Tim Jones, John-Gordon Swogger, Kyle Bastian, Julio Angel Ortiz, Karen Elizabeth Goldenbaum-Brown, Samantha Warner, Robert Mammone, Michael Sky, Jeremy Remy, Alex Wilson-Fletcher, and Richard Peevers, and to series consultant Jez Strickley. Of this incredible team, it is Bob who deserves incalculable credit. Bob is always willing to take chances, and always sees the potential in any idea. He has strong opinions and will argue them with candour and passion. He is an editor who doesn't shame writers by banging their inconsistencies or writing lapses on their heads, but instead Socratically asks if he's right to flag this or that mistake. And he has a healthy sense of humour about what works, and doesn't work. I know I learned a lot from his example, and I'm sure the other editors would agree with me.

Somewhere along the way, perhaps on the back of contributing to *The Temporal Logbook* and Grave Warnings anthologies from Pencil Tip Publishing, I heard of the series and contributed two stories, *Palimpsest* in 2017 and *I.R.L.* in 2020. I enjoyed the blank canvas, although—between you and me, gentle reader—I never cared much for the Laurent Meyer Tenth Doctor (he reminded me a shade too much of the then-current Peter Capaldi incarnation on TV, about whom I remain ambivalent). But then something special happened—there was a vacancy for the Assistant Editor post, which I jumped on. Don't get me wrong, writing is a passion and a thrill for me, but editing marked the beginning of a whole new romance. Sometimes it requires no more than the odd rephrasing and copy-editing; sometimes it demands nothing less than the full-on page-one rewrite when a writer has abandoned their half-finished first draft in flames. Whatever is required, that creativity, thinking and *re*-thinking concepts, cranking out innumerable drafts and tweaks and polishes (how many documents named 'Final Draft' turned out to actually *be* the final draft?), and getting more input and inspiration from Bob and Richard, I was enthralled. I have vivid memories of reworking a really interesting story by Matthew James, *Diversify or Die*, and swapping emails with Bob in November 2020. Against the dark background of the COVID pandemic and another nail-

biting American election, I found *TDWP* as welcome as an open TARDIS door in a monster-infested quarry.

Even more intriguingly, Bob and Richard planned to end that season by regenerating the Meyer Doctor and getting rid of his companion Hannah, offering a totally blank slate for future seasons. Cue more interesting feedback with the editors and with other *TDWP* writers, all leading to me ‘casting’ my friend, and talented Calgary actor, Tenaj Williams as Winston Adderly our Eleventh Doctor (a full eight months before Ncuti Gatwa was announced as the real-life Fifteenth, Doctor—I was rather pleased to beat Russell T Davies to the punch). Another golden day of my *TDWP* tenure was in September 2021, meeting Tenaj and my friends Kevin and Stacy Krisa and Adam McAlonan on the rooftop of Calgary’s Broken City, owned by the generous and affable Alan Lindsay. There, Tenaj gamely donned a couple of Doctor-ish long green coats and struck various dramatic poses in and around the bar’s TARDIS prop, while Kevin even more gamely donned rubber alien gloves and pointed laser pistols at him. And I couldn’t resist one picture outside the TARDIS handing the keys to him *a la* McCoy and McGann.

I am so pleased with how this era has turned out. Three seasons and twenty-six exquisite adventures, from *The 108-Year Hitch* (2021) to the finale you’ve just put down. I’m not too modest to deny being pleased by my own work, but I’ve been equally delighted by the tales spun by Matt Tovey, Richard Hoover, Nick Krohn, James T. Jeans, Rachel Redhead, Mark Horrocks, R. Morgan Crihfield, Matt Whittern, and Miles Reid-Lobatto. Again, the work these talented and much-put-upon minds have contributed, the sometimes-excruciating process of getting a story into shape, would make more precious scribes fire off some nasty emails. But these wonderful people responded to feedback, and made every successive draft the best it could be. I’m so pleased with the characters we’ve breathed life into together—our Eleventh Doctor and Maggie Weitz, as well as those other unique companions Kaylaar, Simon Denon, the evangelical computer of the Lifeship *Miracle*, and Constable Reg Cranfield. I loved dashing off, at incredibly short notice, *Signal to Noise*, to mark the BBC’s 100th anniversary in 2022 (and I made that anniversary a part of the story). I’m particularly pleased how we were able to celebrate *Doctor Who*’s sixtieth anniversary with a bumper-length Season 44, which encompassed a run of stories that genuinely probed the Doctor’s character and suggested how he *felt* about his life. It was great to blur the lines and incorporate Bob, Richard, and I into the wraparound of the anniversary tale, *A Mild Curiosity in a Junkyard*. I was able to script a purely historical story, *The Sawbones and the Grey Fox*—I’ve always loved that *Doctor Who* subgenre and find it shameful the BBC Wales gang have never had the guts to attempt one. And I think these last few episodes in our split-in-two Season 45, building up to this conclusion, have had that giddy feeling that maybe—just maybe—the Doctor wouldn’t make it out in one piece.

But to be honest, dear reader, joyous though the end result is, the road to it can be frustrating. One too many missed submission deadlines, one too many times we’ve had to cobble together a substitute to fill up the season, and one too many times we didn’t hear back from interested writers, inevitably took its toll on Bob and me. It convinced us that, while the website can and should carry on, doing these full seasons was too much for either of us to commit to, going forward.

And I hope my valedictory tone doesn’t make this all sound too final. Because *The Doctor Who Project* will continue. The strand of *Brief Encounters*, chronicling short interludes with all eleven Doctors, will pop up every so often, and Bob may find other infrequent ways to continue the story. I ended *The Last Doctor* with the suggestion that our Time Lord may now possess the memories and experiences of all those other sideways dimensions, from Cushing to Briggs to Gatwa—and again by coincidence, Richard E. Grant’s alternative ninth incarnation has popped up on screen in the most recent season, so clearly Russell and I continue to be on the same creative wavelength. Though I shouldn’t put words into ol’ RTD’s mouth, I think we have a common aim—he from his massive platform and me from my much smaller one: to open our arms and embrace the whole thrilling gamut of possibilities offered by this zany show. Rather than closing off story possibilities and limit our imaginations, let’s open everything up and expand the boundaries. The Doctor ends the Project on his way to some extraordinary adventure we can only imagine. But who knows, maybe some other brave writer *will* imagine it? Or perhaps they’ll want to pick him up later down the line? Or even introduce a twelfth and a thirteenth TDWP incarnation in due course? So I urge you to pop in to the site regularly, and keep up with its social media outcroppings, as there will definitely be new adventures to enjoy. And send in your own ideas!

So all that is left to say is a heartfelt message to you, dear reader. Thank you for being there, thank you for your enjoyment. Even if you didn't like the stories, thanks all the same for reading them. Your attention and your passion are the ultimate, overwhelming reasons for doing this. We may have written them for free, but knowing there were people willing and eager to listen to our takes on these characters and plots has more value than you can ever know. Happy times and places, eh?

Hamish Crawford
Skaro, June 2024

AFTERWORD AFTER THE AFTERWORD

1999–2024. Twenty-five years. I can't believe it's been twenty-five years. Time has certainly flown by. *The Doctor Who Project* has been around twenty-five years! And yes, you did read that correctly.

When I sit down and think about it, that fact is simply amazing. When *The Doctor Who Project* began, I never ever thought we'd be here celebrating twenty-five years. But here we are. Wow! Along the way though there have been ups, downs, side trips, tangents, along with moments of sheer panic, frustration, aggravation, disappointment – and yes, there's been joy, satisfaction, excitement, and great pride in knowing that the project has meant so much to so many people. Overall, it has been an amazing ride.

I've only played a small part in the on-going success of the project and I'd be a complete fool not to acknowledge the many individuals who over the years have played a much bigger and more important part in ensuring that TDWP reached this milestone. If it weren't for that monthly TASC (*Telefantasy Appreciation Society of Canada*) meeting in mid-1998 where Misha Lauenstein, Pat Burt, Terry Baker, Bonnie Gale, Jay Demetrick and I were bemoaning the lack of new *Doctor Who*, we wouldn't be here today. Those five individuals provided the initial spark, and inspiration, which sowed the seeds of the project.

In the weeks that followed, Misha and I sought out writers to provide stories for the very first 'season'. Neither of us really had any experience with producing this sort of project – trust me when I admit I had no experience with writing, editing and publishing – in the end we managed to pull together submissions from John-Gordon Swogger, Rebecca Dowgeirt, Charles Kirchoff, James Margitch and Scott Marshall, while Misha provided two stories. And having never considered myself a fiction writer, in a moment of sheer craziness, I attempted writing my first piece of fiction since elementary school, providing a short interlude piece that sat between Misha Lauenstein's "Best Enemy" and "Stigmata" by Rebecca Dowgeirt. (You might remember it? It was called, "The Doctor's New Clothes".)

Those first eight stories were emailed out to subscribers beginning in January 1999 and eventually gathered together in the very first season omnibus publication – Season 27 Omnibus – in May 1999. Including that first season and over the subsequent years TDWP has published a total of 208 original stories – 18 seasons, 10 specials, 5 'lost' stories and 47 past Doctor stories (Brief Encounters), plus an assortment of miscellaneous additional publications like *The TDWP Series Bible*, *Best of The Doctor Who Project 1999–2012*, *Blossom Core: The Comic*, *The Christmas Omnibus*, *The Write Stuff*, and several more.

I must pay tribute to the numerous writers, editors, and artists who have contributed to TDWP over the past twenty-five years. Credit and many thank you's must also go to each of them. The project benefitted greatly from these individuals who gave freely of their time and talents, many going beyond the call of duty for a fan project, and something they didn't get paid for doing. I owe each one of them a great deal and I am eternally grateful to all of them...

Editors: Misha Lauenstein, Tim Jones, Kyle Borcz (aka Kyle Bastian), Julio Angel Ortiz, Alex Fletcher, Karen Goldenbaum (aka Karen Gold), Michael Sky, Samantha Warner, Robert Mammone, Jez Strickley, Jeremy Remy, Benjamin Pocock, Richard Peevers, and Hamish Crawford (both who have played a big part in helping keep TDWP going over the past four years).

Artists: John-Gordon Swogger (who created the original look and style of TDWP), Robert Carpenter, Alex Lydiate (all three gentlemen have been the project's most prolific artistic creators), Devon Shaddick, Kevin Mullen, Mark Hyland, Tom Denham, Philip Boyes, Iain Robertson, Brian Taylor, Jamie Hunn, Jack Drewell (who also created and designed the numerous versions of our website), Karen Kalbacher, Nick Giles, Mik Whiting, Will Brooks, James P. Quick, Robert Pollock, and Mark Horrocks.

Writers: Misha Lauenstein, John-Gordon Swogger, Rebecca Dowgeirt, Charles Kirchoff, James Margitch, Scott Marshall, Jodie van de Wetering, Matt Grady, Tim Jones, Kyle Borcz (aka Kyle Bastian), Karen Goldenbaum (aka Elizabeth Gold, Karen Gold), Julio Angel Ortiz, Lesleigh Force, Mark Simpson, Arnold T. Blumberg, Stephanie Crawford-John, Graham Bell, Jackson Rees, Duncan Johnson, Miles Reid-Lobatto, Jeff Taylor, Andy McCoy, Will Harvey, Alex Fletcher, Craig Charlesworth, David P. May, Robert Mammone, Jez Strickley, Simon Birks, Samantha Warner, Karen Kalbacher, Charles Heathcote, Daniel Tessier, Jake Johnson, Will Hadcroft, Matthew James, Kevin Mullen, Krista Wilson, Lynn Clark, Richard Michaels, Hamish Crawford (who deserves extra special thank you for his outstanding dedication to the project these past several years, providing stories at the last minute, coming up with viable solutions when writers would go AWOL or pending projects would go pear-shaped, and especially for being all-round super individual), James P. Quick, Jeremy Remy, Ian Manning, Richard Hoover, Nick Krohn, R. Morgan Crihfield, James Kyle, Matt Tovey, James T. Jeans, Rachel Redhead, Meg McDonald, Mark Horrocks, John Davies, Ian Wheeler, John Callaghan, Steve Oliver, Martin Montague, Martin Broome, David Wallington, Michael Baxter, Chris McKeon, John G. Wood, Nick May, Paul Williams, Chris Heffernon, Philip Bates, Nick Mellish, Jamie Hunn, Selim Ulug, David N. Smith, Blazej Szpakowicz, Richard Peevers, Evan Semon, and Ian Cai Mercer - all who have written some of the most amazing, creative, imaginative, epic, and brilliantly original stories ever.

I would especially like to thank Tenaj Williams for allowing us to use his likeness as the basis for our Eleventh Doctor.

And finally to all of our readers and fans, thank you for being part of this amazing journey. Thank you for sticking by us for these 25 years. Thank you for your continued support, encouragement and enthusiasm for all that we do. I hope that you have enjoyed reading our stories and it's been a pleasure sharing the journey. Without each of you, TDWP would have disappeared years ago. Y'all rock!

*Bob Furnell
August 2024*

THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT

The TARDIS arrives at a destination the Doctor has long been dreading: the city of London in 2963, one thousand years after he left with Susan, Ian, and Barbara. But time is not running as it should: the continuum has shrunk to this one day; everyone on Earth blindly worships the Doctor; and all the peoples of the universe have ceased their conflict, subjugated by a boy as irresponsible as he is powerful, who claims he is the Doctor's final incarnation.

Maggie knows in her marrow that the boy cannot be the Doctor, but finds her faith tested by the astonishing return from the dead of her husband, Ollie. As if that is not bad enough, the Doctor's seventh incarnation has also arrived, concerned his timeline has been knocked off course since he left Perivale with Ace in 1989, and thus intent on assassinating his eleventh self to prevent this 'Last Doctor' from existing.

Can the two Doctors, Maggie, and Ollie outwit all the Time Lord's former foes, now acting in the service of this twisted glimpse of his future? What does all this have to do with the Doctor's unsettling dreams, and his increasing inability to distinguish them from reality? What secret is hidden beyond Earth's sun? And what greater force is behind the 'Last Doctor'?

This time the Doctor means it when he says that nothing will ever be the same again.

.....

This story features the Eleventh Doctor as played by Winston Adderly

